









The "Miss Toosey" Books By EVELYN WHITAKER

MISS TOOSEY'S OUR LITTLE ANN
MISSION, LADDIE, and PRIS
ROB AND KIT
RABY LORN ROSE AND LAVEN-

BABY JOHN, ROSE AND LAVEN-ZOE, and FOR DER

THE FOURTH TIP-CAT TIME OF ASK- PEN

ING POMONA

Belle Lassie

DEAR FAITHFUL, and
DON WARD'S CROSS

LIL GAY

MY HONEY





GAY







"No one didn't put me out."

GAY: A STORY

BY

EVELYN WHITAKER

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY PERCY TARRANT

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GAY

CHAPTER I

A FLITTING

Strange to our ears the church-bells of our home; The fragrance of our old paternal fields May be forgotten.—KEBLE.

F you want really to get a just idea of the value of your household goods, the surest way to arrive at it is by observing them during their removal from one house to another; and the moment of deepest humiliation is when some cherished possession, which you have always hitherto regarded with respect, stands on the pavement on its way from the van to the house, exposed to the deriding gaze of passersby, in all its naked shabbiness.

You can hardly recognise your household gods, your respectable if not elegant Lares and Penates, so disreputable do they appear — far more suited for a second-hand furniture dealer's fusty

premises than for the freshly decorated rooms, which seem to look rather coldly on their new inmates, and to resent being put off with such dowdy garniture instead of the spick-and-span furniture from Maple's or Shoolbred's which would have better suited their æsthetic taste.

The old furniture, on its part, is quite aware that it is being disparaged, and behaves accordingly, and is three-cornered and tiresome to a degree you would hardly have believed possible in the kindly old tables and wardrobes and bookcases which always seemed so conciliatory and adaptable in their former quarters. Now they are awkward and clumsy and unaccommodating, too large for everywhere you wish them to go, sullenly turning their very worst side foremost and displaying faults and blemishes of which you never suspected them before, and spitefully putting out corners and angles to damage the supercilious paint and paper sneering down at them.

Oliver Bruce, as he stood on the damp pavement, littered with straw and paper, surveying the unpacking of his furniture from the great yellow van, and its gradual conveyance up four flights of stairs to the flat he had taken in Parley Mansions, West Kensington, felt that he ought to apologise to the world in general for the shabbiness of his belongings, and to the workmen for the labour he was exacting from them on such very inadequate grounds.

I think at one moment — when the men were half-way upstairs with his large bookcase, and he felt that the Egyptian task-masters were as nothing to him — that he seriously considered whether he would not bid them hold their hands and construct a bonfire in the street, if the County Council would allow of such a thing, or implore the men to accept the furniture as a gift, if only they would take it clear away out of sight; and then he could proceed to furnish that high-perched eyrie of his with wicker-work and bamboo and art muslin, which could be carried up without such herculean labours.

That dearly-beloved old bookcase had stood so compactly and unobtrusively in the library at home — no, at The Dene, he meant, for it was home no longer — had fitted in as naturally as the books fitted into its shelves, each having its recognised place by right of old tenure, so that it would be a downright affront to Chaucer to put Ben Jonson in his place, or to allow Bacon

to intrude upon Shakespeare. Oliver could find any one of the books in the dark, and, when first the prospect of leaving the old home opened before him the principal, all-important necessity in the new dwelling - you cannot call a place a home for at any rate a couple of years - was that there should be a good wall for this old friend to stand against. This he thought he had found when, with a measuring-tape, he checked off the required number of inches against the tastefully sprawling poppies and corn-flowers of one of the rooms. It had never occurred to his mind that there would be any difficulty in placing it there, or to consider the turns of the staircase up which it must go, or, when it had once reached his flat, the carefully economised space of that multum in parvo, and the narrow passage up the middle, out of which contracted doorways led, allowing but little scope for the manipulation of a long, heavy piece of furniture.

Oliver tried to imagine his folios and rare old editions arranged in bamboo bookcases or accommodating themselves to shelves nailed up in the recess by the fireplace, which the clerk from his landlord's office suggested most of the tenants resorted to. "With some stamped leather and a

few brass-'eaded nails, it makes an uncommonly neat job of it."

At one time it seemed as if the only possible room in the flat into which the bookcase could be got was the kitchen; and then it would have to stand forlornly in the middle of that apartment, for the dresser at one end and the sink at the other, and the fireplace and window on either side, monopolised the respective walls. Whatever would Mrs. Sims say at having her kitchen lumbered up by what at the best of times she was apt to call "rubbishy old books"? For, after the bookcase, the thing that lay heaviest on Oliver's mind was Mrs. Sims.

Mrs. Sims is certainly deserving of a new chapter, but while the men, with a good deal of strong language, are trying to get the bookcase in — which, I may as well say at once, was ultimately done triumphantly, to the very spot intended for it — it is a good opportunity for telling the reader about her.

She had been Oliver Bruce's nurse in the days of his childhood, and had ruled supreme over him and his mother; and when Oliver had grown out of pinafores and would no longer submit to being put in the corner, but asserted his boyhood with an independence and masterful spirit which she first resented and then admired, she transferred her affectionate tyranny to his mother.

Mrs. Bruce was a fragile, poor-spirited woman, glad to lean on or cling to anything, especially to such a sturdy, staunch, little prop as Smithson, as she then was. Oliver, coming home from school, was forcibly reminded of his own days of servitude when Smithson, shawl in hand, hunted his mother up from unwise lingering in the sweet May twilight garden, or pursued her with glasses of milk or little brews of beef-tea at inopportune moments, or gave vent to loud and significant "Ahems!" outside the door when bedtime had come unnoticed while the mother talked to her boy.

Sometimes Oliver would incite his mother to rebellion; but, after all, the tyranny was so loving and unselfish that it disarmed resentment, and in term time, when he was away, his mother had a very lonely life—ill-health and country roads cutting her off a good deal from even the moderate amount of society available in that quiet neighbourhood—and was dependent on them of her own household for entertainment. So, instead of a relief, it was an overwhelming

calamity when one fine day Smithson gave notice to leave.

Oliver met her bouncing out of his mother's room with a red, tear-stained face expressive of the deepest woe; and he found his mother also tearful and tremulous, and yet with an odd little quiver of amusement in her sweet face.

"What on earth's the row?" Oliver inquired; and on receiving his mother's answer, gave vent first of all to a prolonged and incredulous "No—o—o—o?" and then cast himself into an arm-chair and burst into a roar of laughter, in which his mother joined feebly and deprecatingly.

Smithson was going to be married!

It was all very well to laugh, and the situation no doubt had its comic side, as you would have confessed if you could have seen the parties concerned, but it was also, as I have said before, a calamity—just as it would have been a calamity to that luxuriant honeysuckle in the kitchengarden, which tossed its graceful boughs so freely and spread its honey-sweet fragrance all around, if the rotten old post which supported it had been suddenly removed—and the tears in Mrs. Bruce's eyes were not all due to the laughter with which Oliver's boisterous mirth had infected her.

But Oliver kept the comic part of the affair well to the fore, and used to give such graphic and imaginative descriptions of the course of Smithson's true love and the way in which the offer was made, that Mrs. Bruce grew quite hysterical, and could hardly meet Smithson's eye when the next glass of milk or cup of beeftea was due.

Smithson's age had always been a debatable point. A census had occurred three years after she entered Mrs. Bruce's service, and in this census she was certified to be still the same age as she was when Mrs. Bruce first engaged her. Then in ten years another census came, as is the manner of censuses, but did not add ten years to Smithson's age — which fact let mathematicians explain as best they may; and the same curious fact in arithmetic happened when the numbering of the people came round again. On that occasion Mrs. Bruce ventured a gentle remonstrance as she filled up the age of Maria Smithson; but Smithson seemed to think that the census had mainly to do with the insatiable curiosity of the people at the post-office at Merrifield, and she did not see why that should be gratified at her expense, so Mrs. Bruce dropped the subject.

About the bridegroom's age there was no doubt whatever, as all the world knew, and the parish register of Merrifield could attest, that Mark Sims had reached the ripe age of nineteen; so all that the best-informed gossips could safely maintain was that there was considerable disparity of age.

Mark Sims was exactly what the word "lout" calls up before my mind's eye, so if each of my readers will reflect on that word they will arrive pretty accurately at the appearance of the happy bridegroom; and as he had been dead two years before my story begins, having tasted of the delights of married life for only four brief years, there is no necessity to be more exact—though, if need be, the reader can be referred to the somewhat faded photograph in Mrs. Sims's bedroom, where the dear departed is represented with eyes starting out of his head, and a felt hat grasped in one gigantic hand, while the other rests on an ormolu cabinet, behind which velvet drapery in rich folds allows just a glimpse of Windsor Castle in the distance.

There were certainly here all the elements of the absurd: this big young lout, with his foolish, dazzled face and his mouth always a little open, marrying this little, plain, sturdy, middle-aged woman, without even a post-office savings-bank book to account for it; for, as was well known, Smithson sent home every penny she could spare to keep her old parents out of the workhouse.

The village folk made endless fun of a cartwheel order, you may be sure. Mark's prayerbook in his pew in church was quite worn and creased at the place where it is intimated that a man may not marry his grandmother.

Oliver, as we have seen, was inclined to make the most of its ludicrous side, though all along it was mostly to prevent his mother from contemplating the pathetic; but by degrees it dawned on him that under the absurdity of this apparently ill-assorted union lay the beautiful old, old story, and that these incongruous twain were marrying one another out of pure love, which is more than you can say for half the marriages of most suitable and fitting circumstances.

You must credit Oliver Bruce with considerable acumen in discovering this fact. We most of us pride ourselves on seeing farther into a brick wall than our neighbours do, and freely dissect the skeleton in each other's cupboards without a doubt in our perspicacity. Very few

of us, however, really possess those Röntgen rays which enable us to locate the bullet—or shall we call it the heart's own bitterness?—that is sapping the strength of the friend we fondly fancy we know through and through; and if we ever arrive at it, it must be from clumsy probing, or from intuition if the operator happens to be a woman.

But it was no bullet or skeleton, bitterness or shame, that Oliver detected beneath the apparent utter indifference of Smithson and her swain, loutish surliness on his side, snubbing disparagement on hers; neither was it a fellow feeling which made Oliver so clear-sighted, for he had no experience of the tender passion, boys who are devoted to their mothers generally escaping the infection longer than others who have not the powerful antiseptic of a mother's love.

But I am becoming painfully surgical in my images, perhaps because that, at the time of Smithson's marriage, Oliver had every intention of taking up medicine as his profession in life—an intention, however, that he very soon abandoned.

The matrimonial bliss of the Sims couple did not, as I have said, last very long; and Mrs.

Sims, having been a widow two years when Mrs. Bruce died, volunteered with alacrity to come as housekeeper to Oliver when he moved up to London—an offer which he accepted with somewhat mixed feelings.

CHAPTER II

OLIVER'S MOTHER

Little suits it me
To break upon the Sabbath of her rest
With any thought that looks at other's blame;
Nor would I praise her but in perfect love.—Wordsworth.

LIVER BRUCE had those unlucky possessions for a young man, an income just enough to make him independent of his own exertions, and a fond, admiring mother, who reflected all his whims and moods, and listened with earnest conviction to all his very immature and youthful conclusions. So more than one profession was contemplated for his walk in life, and the initiatory steps taken to enter upon it, and then discarded for some reason entirely convincing to Oliver and his mother.

"And I am quite sure," Mrs. Bruce would say to her intimates, "that Oliver was perfectly right. I only wish you could have heard what he said about it. I am such a bad hand at repeating, but it was really beautiful, and I feel very proud and thankful"—here she would become tearful—"of having such a highly principled son."

Mrs. Bruce, of course, could appreciate more keenly than the ignorant outside world what brilliant prospects her son was sacrificing for the sake of his principles when he gave up the idea of the army. Was it not Napoleon the Great who said that there was a marshal's bâton in the knapsack of every private soldier? In Oliver's portmanteau, packed for Sandhurst, were V.C.'s and stars and medals without number; though Mrs. Bruce would have looked in vain for such articles in other lads' luggage.

So also with the Bar. Mrs. Bruce did not need her *pince-nez* to see the path on which Oliver's feet were entering when he began eating his dinners—a path leading clear away to the Woolsack; and his determination not to take orders no doubt deprived the Church of a bishop, or even archbishop, of great eminence.

Oliver was not silly enough to share his mother's estimate of his abilities. But you cannot stand continually on a pedestal in another person's eyes without insensibly standing a little too high in your own; from which altitude it gives you a shock when you step suddenly down to your proper level, even if it is only a very slight descent, like missing the last step in a flight of stairs and landing with a jar on the mat at the bottom.

At the moment when my story begins Oliver was standing, as it were, on the mat; for his mother was dead and her tender adulation buried with her in the quiet country churchyard where the white violets grew thick under the mossy headstones that mild March day when they laid her to rest, and the blackbird's long, soft note echoed the words of sure and certain hope from the quickset hedge close by, covered with tiny unfolding buds, telling of the great Springtime when this life's winters will all be over.

It was vexatious to Oliver to find that he really was above his right level. He had always laughed at his mother's innocent flatteries, and assured her that her swan was a very commonplace, ordinary goose, so this vexation added a little to tne jar of his descent, and made him inclined to go to the other extreme and underestimate his capabilities; which was not a fortunate frame of mind for facing the criticism of

a cold world, which is apt to take a man at his own estimation with a good discount off.

Oliver Bruce at eight-and-twenty had lost some of that elasticity of youth, that glossy duck's plumage, which is not exactly conceit, off which in the springtime of life the sharp showers and stinging hailstones roll so easily that when the sun comes out again a wag of the tail and a stroke down of the feathers with a yellow bill sets matters all right again, and the sufferer proceeds to the pursuit of the relishing slugs which that very storm of rain may have brought out. In after-life we face such buffets of fortune more like a cat who creeps into shelter drenched and draggled, and spends miserable hours licking wet fur with a rough, dry tongue.

Mrs. Bruce's annuity died with her, and though The Dene was no very grand country-seat, but only a pleasant, old-fashioned cottage, its rent and attendant expenses were more than Oliver's income would cover, even if his book, which was nearly completed, were as great a success as his mother confidently expected. Besides which, in London he would be more within reach of books of reference, and be able to consult authorities,

and get into personal touch with those strange and mysterious powers, the publishers, of whom Mrs. Bruce spoke with bated breath, dimly imagining them to resemble Great Agrippa in *Struwwelpeter* with his gigantic ink-pot.

But I think the main cause of Oliver's removal from The Dene to London was the miss of his mother.

> "But she is in her grave, and, oh, The difference to me!"

He could not face the loneliness which every step of the opening year seemed to accentuate; for he and his mother had both been such keen lovers of nature, and in such perfect sympathy with one another, that every smallest detail was noticed and shared between them, not always in words, but by a look, or a pause to listen, or a smile.

Why, even in that quiet room where she lay dead he would turn with an involuntary smile to see if she heard the sudden silver song of a wren on the rose-branch outside the window, and he stretched his hand to pull back the drawn blind that she might see the tiny, sober brown scrap with its impertinent tail.

The very flowers he laid round her sweet peace were such as she especially loved, and he got up one night from his bed to go and remove one the scent of which she had never liked.

So the only thing to do seemed to go clear away from Nature, who always seemed touching his wound with her great beautiful hand; and a flat in London seemed as far as it was possible to go; and, on the day when he engaged it, a belated fog shut out even the sky overhead, which is one part of Nature not to be easily lost sight of.

When it actually came to leaving The Dene, Oliver was quite surprised to find how many friends he was parting with — friends of the human race, I mean, besides all those exquisite, tender friendships of nature, animate and inanimate, which we appreciate so little.

The quiet, secluded life he had led with his mother had cut him off from such society as there was, and his studious tastes and habits had perhaps done so still more effectually; for friends are linked together in the country, even if long distances lie between them, by hunting and cricket, shooting and tennis, all of which pursuits Oliver honestly abominated. There

was no motive in the shape of brothers and sisters of contrary tastes to make him conceal his sentiments, and the same immunity from compelling circumstances led him to give way to shyness, or indolence, or disinclination, and decline all dances and evening festivities; which may be reckoned a downright misfortune to him, though he often congratulated himself on the subject.

If you come to think of it, how greatly we are indebted to those often irksome obligations to others which force us, bon gré, mal gré, to put our predilections on one side. Apart from the bracing effect on the character, how many of the best and happiest events of our lives come to us when we least anticipate them, and when, if we consulted our own personal inclinations, we should turn our shoulder to the outside world and hug ourselves in bearish solitude.

So it may be reckoned to any one a misfortune to have nothing and nobody to consider but our own predilections; and though, of course, Oliver had his mother, to whom he was without doubt a most devoted and dutiful son, she was so simply a mirror and echo of himself that she was scarcely to be taken into account as an out-

side influence. And yet in spite of all this, and of Oliver's yearly increasing tendency to shut himself up with his books, it was wonderful how many friends he found he had to say goodbye to, with more or less of a pang of regret, when he left The Dene.

Big, athletic young fellows, gaitered and knickerbockered, golf-club in hand, came striding in to shake hands and say they were "awfully sorry, don't you know?" Sleek hunters were reined up, and pink-coated riders hailed him: "Hullo, Bruce! going to leave us -eh? Too bad, by Jove!" Couples of brightfaced, open-air-looking girls bicycled in at his garden gate with messages from mother that he was to be sure and come and say good-bye. Farmers in gigs pulled up fat mares and said they were "main sorry he was going, as had known him and the good lady his mother this many a year." The old woman at the postoffice wiped her eyes over the last shilling'sworth of stamps, and said it would not seem the same place without him for sure! Carters bid their heavy teams "Whoa!" that they might speak kindly, if curiously expressed, words of regret at his departure. Little girls bobbed reiterated short curtsies, and boys touched bleached forelocks on sunburnt foreheads, out of sheer disinterested friendliness, without an ulterior motive of halfpence or apples.

It was curious how Oliver missed these salutations when he first came to London - salutations which he had hardly noticed except by a mechanical nod or motion of his stick as he passed along the village street. Now he found himself occasionally looking almost expectantly at some newspaper-boy or street-urchin, who would no more have thought of touching his hat than of giving an Eastern salaam, being of opinion that one man (he no doubt was smoking a cigarette) was as good as another, and better too. It is doubtful even if a London street-boy could make one of those dear old loutish country bows, as, education being free, the twopence extra for manners is not demanded, nor the commodity supplied; though perhaps in these drilling, warlike times a military salute might be arrived at.

But after this very long digression, during which the bookcase has been safely landed at its proper destination, we must return to Oliver Bruce standing forlornly in his new abode, with all the furniture in chaotic confusion, and not knowing where to begin to restore anything like order.

A charwoman was muddling about, leaving dirty finger-marks on the white paint, and following Oliver about from room to room, expending gigantic labour with a dingy duster on articles of furniture close to where he was standing, and pouring out long accounts of herself and her family, much of which was unintelligible to Oliver, being his first experience of modern Cockney, so that he was at a loss to translate such words as "lydy," "d'y," or "p'y" into or out of the vulgar tongue.

He found himself doing all sorts of trifling and unnecessary things with elaborate pains, such as disentangling bits of string and folding up wrapping-papers, from sheer inability to cope with the larger business on hand; and I think he might have remained in a hopeless muddle to this day if a deus ex machina—or, to be correct, a dea—had not appeared on the scene in the form of Mrs. Sims, née Smithson.

CHAPTER III

LONDON

To London first I turned,
In no disturbance of excessive hope;
By personal ambition unenslaved;
Frugal, as there was need, and though self-willed,
From dangerous passions free. — WORDSWORTH.

HE machine out of which the goddess aforesaid appeared was a four-wheeled cab, with the driver of which a lively dispute at once began on the question of the fare, the coin offered being contemptuously examined as if it were too microscopic to be seen distinctly, and then tossed up as if it were of absurdly light weight.

"Impident feller! I shall take pretty good care not to have his cab again, so he won't find he's got much by that extry sixpence. I'll teach him to try and cheat me!"

The porter belonging to the Mansions, to whom she had appealed to support her against extortion, had in a mean-spirited way taken the part of the cabman in the matter; a want of right feeling and loyalty to his employer which would have been unknown under the feudal system, still prevailing at Merrifield, and which gave Mrs. Sims a very poor opinion of him to start with.

Altogether she was not favourably impressed with London folk and their ways, what with the extortion of the cabman and the supineness of the porter, and the want of neighbourliness of a parlour-maid, who stood at the door of one of the ground-floor flats without offering to lend a hand to help up with the multifarious luggage Mrs. Sims had brought.

It was difficult to her to realise that Master Oliver's domains did not begin at the street door, and that she had no business to turn in at any door that stood invitingly open on the way up, when her wind was beginning to feel the effect of the stairs. She had no breath left to greet Oliver when she reached the top, and she could only gasp and gesticulate and shake her head when Oliver assured her that she would soon get used to the stairs and run up and down like a lamp-lighter.

What ultimately fetched her round, and restored her breath and voluble powers of expres-

sion, was indignation against the charwoman, with whom she quarrelled so conclusively before she had been in the flat half-an-hour that that worthy woman came to Oliver flushed and fiery-eyed, tying her bonnet-strings fiercely, and saying she "were n't going to st'y and be becalled by the old lydy, and if he'd p'y her the money she'd go."

"And a good riddance of bad rubbish," Mrs. Sims said as the door slammed behind the charwoman, the sound echoing down the stone staircase; and she turned such a cheerful, capable face and clean apron and tucked-up sleeves towards Oliver, on whose heart the closing door had fallen like the stroke of doom, that he suddenly and unreasonably cheered up, and sitting down on one of the boxes of books, laughed as he had not done for days—not, indeed, since the sharer of his jokes and the echo of his mirth had left him.

"And now I'll get you a cup of tea and cook you a sausage. I could n't have turned a bit in my mouth, let alone cooked it for you, with that dirty slut trolloping round. I brought them sausages along with me, thinking they might turn in handy, and they 're some I had off Mrs.

Wicks. She killed a pig a Monday, so I knows just what's in 'em, and what they've been fed on, as ain't so easy in these London shops. But there ain't no milk for the tea, so I 'll just step over to the folks opposite and borrow a drop, as I can't never strapus down all them steps and up again for a ha'p'orth of milk."

Oliver was vainly trying to convince her that such friendly borrowings and lendings were not recognised procedure in London, when a loud whistle just behind her made Mrs. Sims start as if she had been shot, and sent, as she expressed it, her heart into her mouth. This anatomical disturbance was only partly allayed by Oliver's explanation of the mysteries of the speaking-tube and parcels-lift, which he demonstrated by ordering a pint of new milk down the first, and revealing it to her astonished eyes in the second; and she had not recovered her equanimity when her nerves were entirely upset again by the ringing of the electric bell, a very different thing from the homely sound of the bells at The Dene set jingling by repeated pulls of the old-fashioned worsted-work bell-rope.

I do not think that to the end of the chapter Mrs. Sims ever left off starting when the bell

rang; and she hung a cloth over the place where numbers show which bell has been rung, because she felt there was something uncanny and mysterious, if not malicious and wicked, in the whole performance, and she would much rather visit each room in succession to find the one from whence the summons came than have dealings with such powers of darkness.

But, in spite of these shocks to her nerves, Mrs. Sims managed to dish up a relishing little meal with a taste of home in it; and she cleared a table and unearthed his own special arm-chair, so that he realised for the first time a possibility of comfort, and began to discover good points in his surroundings, which had been entirely obscured all the day by the apparently hopeless chaos of the furniture, presided over by the dirty-faced charwoman.

He discovered, too, that he was tired, for though his labours had been ineffectual they had been continuous, and he had not sat down once, for each chair was occupied by another turned upside-down, presenting inhospitable legs and castors to the intending occupier. And so, after finishing his meal, he sat on with a pleasant sense of rest—partly, too, from the fear of

startling Mrs. Sims again by the use of the electric bell—and watched the light fading on the roofs and chimneys opposite, and on a large plane-tree in a garden near, the branches of which stood out clear and delicate against a bit of saffron sky, a little hazy, perhaps, with smoke, but still rich and warm in colouring.

So Oliver Bruce had not got clear away from Nature after all. "If I take the wings of the morning, and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there also shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me."

His half-dozing meditations were interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Sims, with a height-ened colour and that particular straightening of the lips that he associated with early days of naughtiness on his part and righteous wrath on hers. She had been greatly mollified from her general disapproval of the flat and all its arrangements by the timely appearance of the pint of new milk in reply to Oliver's order down the tube. It partook of the nature of a conjuring trick, but still it was certainly a convenience, and she felt very up-to-date in making use of all these modern appliances, and wished some of the neighbours at Merrifield who lived a mile

from the shop, and had to send for anything they happened to run short of, and very likely wait while the messenger had a leisurely game of marbles or a few slides on the village pond, could see her with nothing more to do than just say what she wanted down a pipe and find it next minute in a cupboard hard by.

So when the fading light, which Oliver so luxuriously watched, made it difficult for Mrs. Sims to see what she was about, and she did not find among the stores Oliver had ordered in any candles ("Ain't that just like a man?" she commented, with a pitying smile), she stepped to the speaking-tube — with something the same feeling with which the old soldier struck the tinder-box to summon the dog with eyes as large as the round tower of Copenhagen, or Aladdin rubbed his lamp and expected the genii to appear — and in clear Berkshire requested the invisible powers below to send up forthwith "a pound of composite twelves; and while you're about it you may as well send a pound of fours for the parlour, as I ain't had time to see to the lamp." And then she opened the door to the lift and awaited the arrival of the goods with a pleased smile and a wish that a special old

friend of hers, Sarah Jones, who had solemnly warned her against going to London, had been there to see.

As, however, some delay occurred, she repeated the order in somewhat sharper accents and louder tones, bidding them "Look sharp!" as she could n't stand there all night, and again waited in vain.

"It's like their imperence! I should n't wonder if that cabman feller were n't at the bottom of it!" And then, just as she was turning unwillingly to lay a complaint before Oliver, a shrill whistle called her back to the tube.

"Evening piper, indeed! Is that what you call composite candles in London? It's a pity you can't call things by their right names!"

Perhaps it was quite as well that Sarah Jones was not there to see when the lift came up with the Pall Mall Gazette, ordered by Oliver that morning; and it was also well for the paper-boy that four stories divided him from Mrs. Sims, and that her indignation rendered her speechless till he was some distance from the tube and whistling "Rule Britannia," unconscious of the wrath he had aroused.

Oliver had sternly to suppress his amusement

at Mrs. Sims's idea of the unlimited resources of the speaking-tube; but she was in no condition to receive the fresh shock of the electric light which he now revealed to her.

She looked very sourly at the sudden appearance of a glowing red worm, brightening into a white flame, in the glass overhead when no one was near with a match or a bit of lighted paper, and Oliver was standing by the door quite away from it.

I verily believe this would have been the last straw to break this faithful old camel's back, and that she would have gone then and there back into the country, if Oliver had not once been her idolised baby whom she had bathed and powdered and given his bottle, and nursed through his teething, and punished in his tantrums, and loved and cared for and tyrannised over. "And ain't no more able to take care of hisself properly now than then!"

CHAPTER IV

GAY'S ADVENT

A little child-angel
Passed down the street,
With trailing pinions
And weary feet;
The moon was hidden,
No stars were bright,
So he could not shelter
In heaven that night,
For the angels' ladders
Are rays of light.—ADELAIDE PROCTER.

NE of the things that Oliver missed most, now his mother was gone, was some one with whom to share the jokes of life—the hundred and one little absurdities that bubble up on the great, sad, solemn stream of life, apparently quite invisible to most of those who are swept along by the strong current bearing them to the sea. There are so many more people who are ready and capable of weeping when you mourn to them than there are to dance even when you pipe your merriest; though I think the dancers make the best mourners, too, when the occasion offers.

Oliver was blessed — for it is one of Heaven's best blessings — with a keen sense of the ridiculous, inherited from his mother, a gift which had helped them over some of the rough places of life as only a laugh will do.

I remember once hearing the widow of a great missionary bishop describe how, among all the hardships and difficulties and even sufferings of their life, they used to laugh at the absurdities mixed up with it all. "I don't know what we should have done if we had not laughed," she said.

Mrs. Sims, among her many virtues, had not that of a sense of humour; and perhaps it is a gift not to be highly desired in servants, as an irrepressible chuckle behind your chair at dinner, or an explosion of mirth as your hat is handed to you in the hall, or a face contorted with amusement reflected in the glass over the mistress's hairdressing does not altogether belong to the eternal fitness of things.

But, in those early days in the flat, Oliver felt that it would have been a great relief to have had a good laugh with a congenial spirit over some of the little occurrences that, if you did not treat them as a joke, were apt to take the form of annoyances. But after a time he left off looking up to catch a responsive twinkle in a sympathetic eye, and storing up odd sights and sayings to retail to an appreciative ear, and in course of time he probably would have gone on to cease to notice or be amused at such things. It takes two to make out a joke, and I doubt if Robinson Crusoe even smiled or felt the slightest inclination to do so till Man Friday appeared on the scene. I have seen faces of the most profound solemnity bent over *Punch*; though, to be sure, that was frequently in the waiting-room of a dentist.

On reflection, however, I think one ought to except the young from this necessity of sympathy in amusement, as one knows, perhaps by rather irritating experience, how a little girl will occasionally be seized with irrepressible attacks of giggling at some untimely occasion, and a boy explode, in spite of all efforts to restrain it, into unseasonable mirth in the company of grave and reverend seigniors. And then there are young creatures of other kinds—lambs—who, suddenly possessed by some tremendous joke, bound up clear into the air, with all four thick young legs off the turf, and kick up clumsy hind-

quarters and long tails, to the bewilderment of heavy, woolly old mothers; for, of all animals, sheep at maturity have least sense of humour. And then, too, there are kittens, frisking and rolling and turning head over heels under the severe gravity of their mothers' yellow eyes; and young pigs' impudent gambols, infinitely disturbing to their great hulk of a mother—though, to be sure, these have companionship in their gambols.

But to return to Oliver Bruce. I think he would soon have lost all sense of the motley worn under the world's broadcloth if he had not made the acquaintance of Gay; and the acquaintance was begun under very curious and unconventional circumstances, Gay being arrayed neither in motley nor broadcloth, but in a night-shirt from under which pink toes peeped out.

Oliver had been settled in his flat for three months before this acquaintance was made, and Mrs. Sims had accommodated herself by degrees to the suspicious strangeness of her surroundings, though she still regarded the electric light with aversion tinged with fear, and would prefer to light up ends of candle or a strongly

smelling kerosene lamp rather than avail herself of it. She waged incessant war with the porter and with most of the tradesmen's boys who ventured to whistle up the speaking-tube, a form of notifying their presence down below which she could not regard as anything but intentionally insulting. As a rule she protected herself from this impertinence by sallying forth with a large basket on her arm and bringing in all her parcels herself.

In her letters to old friends at Merrifield Mrs. Sims no doubt expatiated on the conveniences of London life, and spoke patronisingly of the makeshifts and old-fashioned doings of the country; but when talking to Oliver, wild horses would not have drawn a word of even the most mitigated praise from her buttoned-up mouth, and, if Oliver had not known her of old, he might have thought she was enduring a martyrdom of inconvenience and discomfort on his account.

Oliver himself found his new quarters decidedly to his taste now that his books were all put into their exactly right places, where he could find them in the dark; his engravings hung as much as was possible in the light in which he

had been used to see them; and his writingtable put at a judicious angle with the window, so as to get all the light available and allow of his seeing, as he sat there, that afore-mentioned plane-tree, which since he came had spread its broad leaves, hiding the white scars on its trunk.

As regards the position of his writing-table, his present circumstances were superior to his past, though he would not acknowledge it even to himself, feeling as if it were disloyalty to his mother. She had the idea, common to her generation, that a table should either be mathematically in the centre of the room or against the wall. Oliver's writing-table, for which piece of furniture she had a profound reverence, was symmetrically placed against the wall opposite the window, so that his own shadow always darkened the page before him; and she also occasionally elected to do the dusting herself, rearranging Oliver's papers with an agonising neatness which, had it been done by a less loving hand, would have called forth unparliamentary language from the sufferer.

He was free to live just as he liked, with a certain moderate consideration for Mrs. Sims —

to have his meals when he wanted them, to go out or stay in as the spirit moved him, to sit up to the small-hours or to turn in at an infantine bedtime according to his inclination, to wear his slippers and his old smoking-coat all day, and to prop his book against the cruet-stand or coffeepot at his own sweet will.

It was very comfortable, but not, perhaps, altogether wholesome. We certainly have the highest authority that it is not good for man to live alone, and I sometimes wonder if some of those old hermits and recluses might not have been more saintly if they had been exposed to the little daily rubs of life resulting from intercourse with their fellow men or, still more, women; if they had had to get up - yes, even from their prayers, perhaps — and wash their hands for dinner, and, instead of their pulse or mouldy bread, eat an elaborate French dish with affected relish to satisfy kind eyes that are watching to see how the delicacy is liked; if, instead of their hair shirts, they had put on evening-dress, tossed their scourges into a corner, and endured with equal stoicism or saintliness the irritation of inane conversation.

I doubt if Oliver would ever have arrived at

the mitigated saintliness he attained if this life had continued, or would have stopped short of selfishness; but this catastrophe was mercifully averted by the appearance of Gay upon the scene, the artiste who, it will be seen, plays the titlerôle in this drama.

Oliver had succeeded in convincing Mrs. Sims of the inhospitable selfishness of neighbours in London, so as to prevent her stepping in to borrow any little thing she happened to want, as she would have done without hesitation to her country neighbours; and perhaps he had rather overdone his warnings on this score, for, instead of looking upon them as possible friends, Mrs. Sims proceeded to class them as enemies to be regarded with the darkest suspicion. The consequence was, Oliver heard nothing about them, as he turned a deaf ear to her severe strictures on the way the doorstep was kept at No. 3, and the smell that saluted her nostrils when the door at No. 5 happened to be open when she passed by - "Enough to poison any one." It was enough for him that his own domain was kept scrupulously clean, which implied a more persistent warfare waged with smoke and dust than Oliver quite appreciated;

though he gave Mrs. Sims credit for an unusual gift of the virtue that stands next to godliness.

It is curious, also, in flat-life (I speak of those that do not possess passenger-lifts) how little you see of your neighbours above or below, and how rarely you pass them on the stairs. Oliver sometimes wondered if the top flat opposite to his were occupied, so silent and unresponsive looked the closed door with its letter-box and electric bell.

But one night when Oliver was returning from dining with some friends—the Mostyns, about whom I must tell the reader in another chapter—he became aware of something crouched down close to the door of No. 9. He was coming up slowly—an evening at the Mostyns' always had a solemnising effect on him—and, as he approached the upper landing, was feeling in his pocket for his latchkey, as Mrs. Sims would long since have retired to rest, the hour being about eleven.

It was something in white, with a curly head buried in its arms, which were against the door, with an evident ostrich-like idea that, because his eyes were tightly shut and face hidden from view, the whole of the rest of his small person, short night-shirt, pink heels, and tumbled curls were invisible to the person whose footsteps had sounded up the well of the staircase, coming nearer and nearer like impending fate.

"Hullo!" said Oliver; and a thrill passed through the little figure, and a movement was manifest in the pink heels, as though they might be used for kicking purposes, if necessary, in self-defence.

"Who put you outside the door? You must have been a very naughty little——" Oliver hesitated for the sex of the creature, but, misled by the curly head, finished up with "girl."

"I'm not a girl!" indignantly, with a wriggle of small shoulders, for such an insult would be resented by the masculine mind even in the lion's mouth.

"Then it's all the worse," Oliver went on, "for there's no excuse for a boy being so naughty. — And no excuse," he added mentally, "for any one punishing a child in this way. Luckily it's not cold, but bare feet on stones even at midsummer is chilly business."

The "ostrich" had opened one blue eye to survey the tall man, and, perhaps encouraged by a certain grave friendliness of aspect which generally attracted children to Oliver, by degrees an apple cheek came into view, smeared with the traces of recent tears, and an eager, rosy young mouth and a broad brow under the rumpled curls puckered in an urgent endeavour to explain the situation.

"By Jove!" Oliver said to himself, "it only wants a pair of wings and a bow and arrows to turn out a Cupid fully furnished."

"No one didn't put me out. I put myself. And I was n't naughty—at least, not so very particular naughty. And I don't think Maisie will be very, very angry when I tell her."

"Well, that's all right. Then we'll ring the bell, and the sooner you pop back into bed the better."

But an eager little hand was put up to stop him as he prepared to ring the electric bell.

"It's no use," the child said; "there's no one there but Do, and she's asleep. And if it woke her she could n't open the door; she's too little, and she'd cry. She's only a girl and anything makes her cry"—with a surreptitious effort to wipe certain traces from his own manly face, which was now fully revealed to view.

"Shall I try if my latchkey will open the

door?" suggested Oliver. He had already been cogitating that if each key of the various flats would open the large outer door, it should also open the other doors of the flats comprised in the mansion; not a particularly pleasant reflection unless you are assured of the honesty of your fellow-inmates.

But on this occasion he would gladly have relinquished his sense of security from intrusion if he could have let this small outcast back into bed; but the key firmly refused to turn in his neighbour's lock, proving that an Englishman's flat is still his castle, even though the owner of the castle should be standing outside in nightapparel.

"How did you get out?"

"We was in bed before Maisie went, and Do went to sleep and snored — you don't know how she snores, and she's such a little thing! I wanted very bad to be awake when Maisie came home, for she lets me help her eat her supper when I'm awake; and I kept my eyes wide, wide open with my fingers in the corners, and I didn't ge to sleep — I don't think I went to sleep — but all of a sudden I thought I heard her coming, and I got out of bed and went to

the door. She pretends to be awful angry when I'm awake, but it's only make-believe, so I don't mind a bit. I thought I'd just open the door a little wee crack to see if she was coming up the stairs, and I can reach the handle if I stand on a hassock. But she was n't there, and I thought I'd go and peep over the banisters. I was n't a minute gone, and when I got back the door was shut, and I pushed and pushed but I could n't get in." The face had to be covered up now to keep up the theory that it is only little girls who cry.

We laugh at children's griefs and the trifles that cause them, but they are very intense while they last, and there is a sense of despair and irretrievable disaster that overwhelms the young heart out of all proportion to the cause, which is rarely experienced in later years.

"Well, what's to be done now?" said Oliver.
"When will — your mother come home?"

"Maisie? Oh, she never can tell. It just 'pends on how long it lasts. Sometimes she comes quite early, and sometimes it's long, long after Do and me goes to sleep. But she's always there in the morning when we wakes up, for Do and me goes to peep, and we don't

make no noise if she's asleep, for she's so, so tired!"

"Oh, indeed!" was Oliver's unsympathetic mental ejaculation, for the picture of this lively mother going out night after night, no doubt amusing herself till the small-hours, did not appear to him particularly pathetic, though the child's little voice grew very tender and pitiful as he described the weariness that ensued.

"Well, you can't stay here all night. You had better come in with me till your mother comes home."

But to this the child strongly objected, and it required considerable persuasion on the part of Oliver to induce him to come in. During the course of the argument it transpired that the two children always called his flat the Ogre's Den, and Oliver surmised that the festive mother might have encouraged the idea of his ogreish qualities to prevent the children exploring into his domains, just as he had depicted the churlish selfishness of his neighbours to Mrs. Sims with much the same object. The children had added on their own account horrifying and blood-curdling details selected from Jack the Giant-killer, with a flavour of the Three Bears, so

Gay must be credited with courage almost deserving of the V.C. when he adventured one little bare foot on Oliver's prickly door-mat; and even then I think he might have drawn back had not Oliver picked him up and carried him in and deposited him, rather blinking and breathless, in a large arm-chair.

There was nothing ogreish in the look of the room, but Gay told himself that Do would certainly have been frightened when the Ogre lighted up a spirit-lamp and proceeded to make a cup of cocoa, as the flickering blue flame and the cloud of steam were certainly suggestive of a cauldron being prepared for unholy cookery.

A certain trepidation might have been discovered in the manly heart beating under the little night-shirt as the owner thereof sat up cross-legged, tailor fashion, and watched the process with large round blue eyes; but it was very reassuring to see lump after lump of sugar put into one of the cups that were being prepared, as there is no mention of such ingredients in witches' or giants' cookery.

After a vain attempt to discover jam in various cupboards — just those, of course, where Mrs. Sims never thought of putting such arti-

cles of diet — Oliver had to content himself with slices of bread-and-butter, and placed the repast on a chair in front of his small guest; and Gay, forgetting all his terrors, fell to with such an appetite as made Oliver quite hungry himself out of pure sympathy.

"'Licious!" was Gay's verdict when he had scraped out the last sugary remains of his cocoa and cleared the bread-and-butter plate, and Oliver felt as pleased as if he had been a *cordon bleu* receiving the compliments of royalty.

After the meal Gay stretched himself back in the great, deep arm-chair with much satisfaction, and let his curly head sink comfortably into the soft cushion; and for a few minutes he followed Oliver's movements with sleepy eyes, or looked up at the gentle face of one of Murillo's Madonnas, an engraving of which hung on the wall above him. He made one or two drowsy remarks, interspersed with yawns, and then Oliver fetched an eider-down quilt and covered him up, for he was fast asleep—that delightful, profound sleep of childhood that is so sweet and holy a thing.

Oliver had some writing to do which he had made the reason — for it was not merely an ex-

cuse — for leaving the Mostyns' somewhat early; but it is not easy to go on with ordinary avocations when you are aware of entertaining an angel, so Oliver could not even read the evening paper, though it contained news of considerable interest, so fascinated was he by the sleeping figure in his arm-chair, with the long, curled lashes on the apple cheek softly flushed with sleep, the gentle, regular breathing coming from the parted rosy lips.

What sort of mother could it be who could leave such a child night after night, just for her own amusement? But though she did not the least deserve such consideration, he could not make up his mind to expose her to the shock it would be if on her return she found the child had disappeared. So he debated how best to convey to her the information of the child's whereabouts, and he ultimately decided to write a card to fasten to her door. Even that would be enough to send an anxious mother into a fit; but she evidently did not come under that head, so if she had just one minute of anguish it might be a wholesome lesson against such culpable negligence in the future.

He had gleaned that the child's name was

Gay, and that the little sister's name, Do, was the short for Dolores. Dolores and Gay—Grave and Gay. It was a pretty notion, and he wondered as he wrote the card if Dolores suited her name as well as Gay did his,

He wrote: "Please call at No. 10 for Gay. There is nothing the matter, only he is in my flat. — OLIVER BRUCE."

This he fastened to the door at No. 9 so that it could not be opened without the card being seen, and then he settled himself in the armchair opposite Gay with the newspaper; which, however, received very partial attention, so interesting was the study of still life in the sleeping child.

4

CHAPTER V

DORIS

The dainties here
Are least what they appear;
Though sweet in hopes, yet in fruition sour.
The fruit that 's yellow
Is found not always mellow;
The fairest tulip 's not the sweetest flower.— QUARLES.

OW, while Gay is sleeping so peacefully in Oliver's arm-chair, and the owner of that piece of furniture paying very divided attention to the evening paper, it will be a good opportunity to introduce the Mostyns to the reader's attention.

They had at one time been neighbours, as neighbourhood is reckoned in scattered country places, of the Bruces at Merrifield, so the acquaintance between Oliver Bruce and Doris Mostyn had begun when he was a disagreeable and rather priggish little boy of eight, and she a pretty, spoilt baby of three.

Both of them were only children, but each fond mother was not, as superficial observers

of human nature might suppose, sympathetically tolerant of the folly displayed over the treatment of the other's young gosling. On the contrary, each was excessively severe on the other, this being an exception to the rule that "A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind." The beam in her own eye did not by any means prevent each lady from seeing clearly the mote in the other's eye, but rather magnified that object to alarming proportions.

Terms between the two ladies were apt to become a little strained occasionally, since each of them naturally felt anxious to give a little good, sound advice to the other in a truly Christian spirit; a gift which the reader may know by experience neither blesseth him (though it is generally her) who gives nor him who takes, especially when the advice is being given by the pot to the kettle.

Mrs. Mostyn, being of a stronger and more robust build, both in mind and body, than Mrs. Bruce, generally talked that lady down; but Mrs. Bruce had that persistence which frequently compensates for want of strength in gentler natures, and she usually had the last word in such discussions.

The children began with aversion — which, according to Mrs. Malaprop, promised well for their future relations — and went on to toleration, Oliver availing himself of the toys and picture-books in the Mostyns' more affluent nursery when he had tea there, while Doris brought her doll with her when she accepted the hospitality at The Dene, and played her own small games quite irrespective of her host.

It would really be a relief sometimes in grownup society if entertaining could be done in this simple fashion—if guests might examine pictures or take down books from the shelves without making apology or giving offence, or hosts turn their backs on their guests and get out the interest of the moment and muddle about with it undisturbed, instead of wasting time by forcing conversation on subjects uninteresting to both parties concerned.

But when Oliver began to go to school, and Doris to look at him under her eyelashes and wonder how he liked her new frock, these comfortable relations between them ceased, and Oliver felt it necessary to show his little visitor his microscope; though he knew she closed the eye she applied to it, and that her expres-

sions of surprise and admiration at the fly's wing or frog's foot therein displayed were simple politeness, corresponding to his complimentary remarks when she played the "Bluebells of Scotland," counting laboriously throughout, and turning back to begin again when something had gone wrong with the fingering and she found herself landed with a thumb on a note where a little finger should have been. This difficult period might have been bridged by tennis and other games, but, as I have said, Oliver had no taste for these, so the two saw little of one another in hobbledehoy days - for I suppose there is a corresponding period in a girl's life to that uncomfortable phase of a boy's existence.

So when one day, on his return from Cambridge, Oliver found quite a grown-up young lady in his mother's drawing-room, he bowed with the most frigid politeness as to a complete stranger, much to the amusement of his mother and the young lady, who extended a hand and claimed him as an old playmate with the ease of manner and absence of embarrassment which give girls such an advantage over their contemporaries, or even elders, of the other sex.

Mrs. Bruce, of course, in those few minutes when Oliver turned red and felt more foolish even than he looked, and when Doris smiled at him with charming self-possession, had arranged with lightning rapidity the future of their lives, the stream of their imaginary true love running with the velocity of a mill-race through the shoals and quicksands of courtship, which so often divert the course of more leisurely currents, to the splendid cataract of matrimony foaming with orange-blossoms and white favours. Beyond this she contemplated the quieter regions of happy married life, the stream flowing peacefully round a churchyard where a christening party bearing another little Oliver stops to look at granny's grave. We may talk of the wonders of the cinematograph, but it is not a patch on a mother's fond imaginings set going by a mere nothing at all.

There was actually a little moisture in Mrs. Bruce's eye over the idea of that grave of granny, before Oliver had dropped Doris's hand, and her gay little laugh at his forgetfulness had died away.

Doris and Oliver saw a good deal of one another during that long vacation, and Mrs.

Bruce lived in a sentimental paradise — we will not call it by a harsher name — and daily added touch after touch to the picture she had sketched in with such a masterly hand in that first meeting of the two as adults.

Mrs. Mostyn also felt a little bit fluttered, and did not quite know how to regard the intimacy between the two young people. Doris was undeniably good-looking, and when she came out at the county ball had been very much admired; and Oliver Bruce could not be regarded as a brilliant match, though no doubt he was perfectly steady and highly principled and "all that."

Why should there be that tone of slightly impatient condescension when we acknowledge such sterling qualities?

Doris had had many admirers at that ball, among them Sir John Littlemore, with many acres, which like charity cover a multitude of sins; and Colonel Morris, with a shady past of which he had not the grace even to be ashamed, finding that it in no way interfered with his reception in the best society, though I do not think a man of his character would have been allowed by a conscientious mistress as a follower

of either of her maids. Nevertheless Mrs. Mostyn was a proud and happy mother at the sight of these in her daughter's train, and other mothers' hearts were correspondingly filled with envy, hatred, and malice because their girls were not so favoured.

So Mrs. Mostyn felt a little irritable at the appearance of Oliver upon the scene, and at Doris's simultaneously developing a taste for Browning, and losing interest in tennis, and showing indifference almost amounting to dislike of dancing. The mother found it very hard to be cordial when Oliver made his appearance at the gate with a book under his arm, or when Doris declined to go to a garden-party, and spent the afternoon in the garden, with Oliver stretched on the grass at her feet.

Mrs. Mostyn felt a good deal puzzled about Doris in those days. There is so much said about the confidence between mothers and daughters, and Mrs. Mostyn would have maintained against all gainsayers that she knew Doris's simple, transparent little nature from end to end. But I think what she contemplated with such loving and admiring eyes was the nature of Doris at the age of eight or nine, and

she was quite unaware of the veil that gathers round the developing character, to keep off prying as well as loving eyes. It was only now and then, when sudden and unaccountable effects were produced, of which she vainly sought to trace the cause, that she began to doubt if the young mind were still so transparent and easy to be read as she liked to imagine.

I really hardly know myself what the girl's feelings towards Oliver were at that time, though authors are more privileged than ordinary mortals to inspect the working of the human heart; but I certainly do not think her liking for Browning was quite disinterested or independent of circumstances, as I happened to come across her copy of that poet's works not long ago, and there were still a good many pages uncut.

But for Oliver's feelings towards Doris I think I can answer quite decidedly, even without reference to his heavily scored Browning, that they were of a very calm and philosophical description, and that he was reading Browning and not love those August afternoons under the cedar, and that Doris was merely an agreeable adjunct who sympathised in his enthusiasm,

which his mother could not even pretend to do. He only felt a passing regret when his mother wrote to him, after his return to Cambridge, and broke to him what she feared would be the distressing news that he would not find the Mostyns at Thorncroft when he came home at Christmas, as they were removing to London.

Mrs. Bruce felt it much more acutely than he did, as she had to take down the elaborate structure she had been erecting on the foundation of the young people's liking; for it was not likely that a pretty girl with some money would remain long unmarried in London. And even if she did not forget Oliver, it would be by no means the same now if Oliver married her, as it might mean a separation between mother and son; which she had never contemplated, and which would necessitate great alterations in the airy architecture her fancy had been erecting.

But the Mostyns' departure had taken place six years before my story began, and Mrs. Bruce's prognostications of Doris's speedy marriage had not been realised as yet; partly, perhaps, owing to Mrs. Mostyn's death, which took place the year after they left. This event left Colonel Mostyn to his daughter's care. I do not

think I have mentioned Colonel Mostyn before, and the reader may have concluded that Doris had no father living; but he was one of those indistinct personalities who leave little impression on the memory. He was merely a relative person, and having always hitherto been Mrs. Mostyn's husband, he now became Doris Mostyn's father. Mrs. Mostyn used to speak of him to the cook as "your master," at which that privileged person smiled derisively.

Mrs. Bruce's motherly soul went out in intense sympathy to the motherless Doris, and if she had not been more than usually invalidish at the time she would have gone then and there to comfort her, expending, as elderly and tender-hearted people are apt to do, almost unnecessarily poignant pity on the bereaved girl, who bore her loss with the equanimity of this sensible age, when hysterics and outward demonstrations of grief are out of date and crape is reduced to the minimum.

Mrs. Bruce was a little bit scandalised at the very narrow edge of black to the paper on which Doris replied to her condolences, and at the matter-of-fact terms in which her letter was expressed, and she felt for the first time that

perhaps it was all for the best that nothing had come about between Oliver and Doris. Since then the intercourse between them had been of an occasional and intermittent character, helped along by Christmas cards, those boons and blessings to men, or rather to women, who have nothing on earth to say but want to say it.

As to Oliver, I think he had almost forgotten Doris Mostyn's existence, though he had made a note of their London address and had a vague intention of finding them out some day. But, in that curious way that atoms drift together in the great whirlpool of London, he had not been in that city a month before he found himself face to face with this very young lady.

He had turned into Kensington Gardens one April day, and was allowing himself for a few minutes the painful sweetness of noticing the gradual progress of the spring, for the first time alone.

"Her mantle, slowly greening in the sun,

Now wraps her close, now, arching, leaves her bare

To breaths of balmier air."

He had found a secluded nook where he might fancy himself in the heart of the country, having, you will remember, come to London purposely to avoid nature; and here he was shortly joined by a chocolate dachshund, who stretched an incredibly long length of dog at his feet, and looked up with liquid, sentimental eyes, which evidently would have explained the whole situation if only men had been endowed with half the ready perception of beasts.

Half-an-hour later arrived a distracted and agonised mistress who had been searching Kensington Gardens high and low for this same dachshund, who received her with mild pleasure at meeting, and surprise that she should be so hot and flustered when she might have known that a sensible creature would take things easily on such a delightful morning.

And in this agitated mistress Oliver recognised Doris Mostyn.

CHAPTER VI

AFTERNOON TEA

Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all The dreary intercourse of daily life. — WORDSWORTH.

RS. SIMS'S remark, when Oliver told her of this curious meeting in Kensington Gardens, was that it was quite providential; which set him pondering on the way in which that expression is used generally by pious, serious-minded people about odd coincidences or unexpected occurrences, often of a very trivial character, as if such were the only manifestations of an overruling power.

Mrs. Sims would say, for instance, that it was quite providential that she had taken an extra loaf when Oliver desired bread-sauce in some unusual combination, quite ignoring the fact that the ordinary daily bread, cottage loaf or Hovis, may on reflection seem quite as providential. It is providential if some chance prevents our going in a train that meets with an accident, but who thinks of the Providence that

takes us safely in that train day after day? But no doubt the word is merely used in the sense of remarkable, and it certainly was so that, among the millions of London, these two should have met who had played together — or, to be more correct, played in the same room — as children, and had later made a tolerably good beginning of that grown-up game of love in those August days at Thorncroft.

In those later days, too, I think they were hardly playing the game together any more than they did as children, but cultivating sentiment and studying Browning in company.

But though inwardly Oliver derided the idea that there was anything providential in this accidental meeting, he had a lurking feeling that if he had read it in a book he might have thought there was something significant about it, pointing to a certain dénouement at the end of the third volume, in the innocent old days of three volumes and happy dénouements.

I think it was partly this feeling that induced him, sorely against the grain, to shake off dull sloth on the Sunday afternoon following his meeting with Doris, and clothe himself in the frock-coat of civilisation and a new pair of gloves, and sally forth in the direction of Notting Hill to the address Doris had given him.

There were many other old family friends and relations who had invited him to come and look them up when they heard of his proposed move to London, and he fully intended doing so some day, but at present he let himself enjoy his entire immunity from the obligations of society, a yoke which never could be said to press very heavily upon him.

He groaned as he took special care that day over his shaving, discovering then for the first time that he had grown a little lax in that respect since the days when his mother had put up a soft, reproachful finger to touch his chin when it was prickly as he kissed her; and he scowled at Mrs. Sims when she picked a thread off the sleeve of his coat, which had already that curious smell of old clothes which stowed-away cloth garments so soon acquire. It was hardly a month since his mother died, and yet there was already a good touch of the Diogenes about Oliver.

The Mostyns' house was a large, comfortable one in Notting Hill, with a big drawing-room at the back looking over a garden, bright and

trim and well-kept, but common to all the houses on the terrace; which, to my mind, takes off fifty per cent. of the enjoyment of a garden, that being superlatively a thing where the sense of possession is half the charm, and which, even if it be a poor thing, should be a thing of one's own, where even the mistakes and failures are interesting and the weeds engaging. But to a visitor like Oliver, who was used to opposite houses and roofs and chimney-pots, with only a sidelong, treasured view of a plane-tree, there was something very pleasant in once more looking out on well-kept turf and beds of tulips from a room which bore the marks of a lady's presiding genius, the want of which Oliver had only indefinitely been aware of, without fully realising what was lacking in his own abode since his mother died.

Oliver often brought in flowers with him, and generally arranged them himself, as Mrs. Sims's idea of flower arrangement was of the cauliflower order; but he never could quite satisfy himself, as what he meant to be grace was apt to be straggling, and artistic combinations of colour were suggestive of the millinery in the Kensington shops.

But here the flowers were just right, and each had its own proper and exquisite fragrance, instead of the smell of cabbage-water or snuff, which sometimes made Oliver resolve to abstain from flowers altogether.

There was a bright fire burning, and the window was open for the frolicsome little April breeze to come in; a combination which Mrs. Sims would not have tolerated for a moment, as she would have said that if it was cold enough for a fire it was a deal too cold for open windows.

Oliver had time to notice the pleasant, civilised aspect of the room at his leisure, as there were other callers, to whom tea was being dispensed from the dainty little tea equipage at Doris's side. So after the first cordial greeting he was left to be entertained by the dachshund, as the Colonel was not present; and after Oliver had responded to chocolate amenities by pulling silken ears and imparting bits of sponge-cake to a gentle, greedy mouth, he watched Doris's graceful hospitalities with warm appreciation.

Doris was certainly very much improved. Girls are not always at their best at eighteen, and Doris had been a little exuberant at that age, and was more to Oliver's taste in her present slim elegance, which, no doubt, was mainly owing to her dressmaker—a fact which a masculine mind was not likely to take into account.

"How my mother used to admire Doris Mostyn!" Oliver remembered; "and how she would have appreciated the improvement in her!"

In those old days Oliver had suspected some of the castles his mother was building in the air, and he smiled to himself now as he recalled them, and reflected that perhaps she too would have joined in Mrs. Sims's opinion that the meeting in Kensington Gardens was providential.

When the other visitors rose to take their leave Oliver felt quite reproached for his own fidgety impatience of their presence by Doris's cordial expressions of regret at their short visit. "I am so glad I was at home!" she said, with a warm-hearted sincerity in the way she spoke which he thought very charming; and she helped one of the ladies to fasten her cape, and found the other's glove, and went with them to the door, with many pretty parting words and

injunctions to be sure and come again very soon.

"Courtesy is a very lovely Christian virtue," Oliver thought.

And then the door closed behind the last trailing skirt, and Doris turned with an expression of intense relief.

"At last!" she said. "I don't think I could have held out for another five minutes. If I had known you were coming I could have told Yates to say not at home."

I dare say if Oliver could have heard the remarks of the two visitors as soon as they were outside the house where they had eaten salt (there was a little silver muffineer to witness to my accuracy), which in old days was supposed to impose silence on adverse criticism, he would not have felt so disillusioned with Doris's Christian courtesy.

"What an affected minx that girl is!"

"Do you think she dyes her hair?"

"Did you take any of that sponge-cake? I saw that lout of a young man giving all his to that horrid dog, and no wonder!"

I do not know, however, why one should feel a defect in one person less because others have the same, any more than that it should be a comfort in pain to know that there are many others suffering more acutely than one's self.

"Now draw up your chair and have another cup of tea, and let us have a good old talk," Doris said.

She had such a pleasant, sympathetic manner, but for a few minutes Oliver could not quite lose the memory of that abrupt change of manner when the door closed on the departing guests, and the sense that the same might be said or felt about him as soon as his back was turned. If Christian courtesy was so very thin it partook of the nature of whited sepulchres.

He lost this feeling by degrees as they talked, for Doris was a good listener, and led him to talk about himself, which is a subject we most of us find very interesting — even the least egotistical of us. He even told her about his book, which as a rule he kept scrupulously out of sight in conversation, being sensitively afraid of boring people about it, and so losing a good deal of sympathy and useful advice; but there was something to irresistible in the interest she expressed that he found himself expanding on the subject as he certainly had not done since his

mother died. Perhaps he would not have broken through his reserve so easily if he had not been hungering and thirsting for that sweet, ignorant, loving sympathy that had lapped him round till a few weeks before.

Once or twice even in that first pleasant afternoon he drew back suddenly into his shell, those delicate susceptibilities of his, like a snail's horns, becoming aware of some foreign substance under the Christian courtesy or affectionate interest.

When Doris was talking about his mother this happened. She was speaking so affectionately and simply; there was a real little tear shining on her long, dark lashes, and a small catch in her voice that went to Oliver's very heart and made him open out unusually; and then came a little slip showing that she was misty about dates and imaginative about facts. "How could you expect otherwise," he asked himself irritably, "when, after all, she had not seen my mother for something like six years, and then did not know her very intimately?" And an ungenerous other self, of whom he was heartily ashamed, replied, "You would not have expected it if she had not affected to remember so exactly."

And it was the same about his book, though

he told himself that only a conceited jackass could feel nettled because a girl's attention wandered and she became a little bit mixed when a fool was boring her about his own concerns. And again the other self answered, "She had every appearance of intense interest."

But, on the whole, Oliver carried away a very pleasant impression of Doris Mostyn, and responded cordially to her invitation to "come again very soon, Oliver."

She had a pleasant smile and a frank look in her gray eyes, as if she really meant what she said, and it was agreeable to hear his Christian name spoken with a little hesitation, for she had kept hitherto to the more formal "Mr. Bruce."

So he kept her hand a second longer than necessary in his as he answered, "Of course I will, Doris;" and he thought the colour deepened a little in her cheek, though it might have been only the red shade of the lamp that had just been lighted.

CHAPTER VII

MAISIE

Then gently scan thy brother man, More gently sister woman. — BURNS.

BURR-BUZZ! Burr-buzz! While I have been telling the reader about the Mostyns, Oliver had been asleep, and started up with a confused sense of irritation with himself for having been so foolish as to fall asleep in his chair, and that by no means the most comfortable one he possessed, instead of going to bed like a reasonable Christian.

Could it be morning? And if not, who on earth could it be making such a row at the bell in the night? — for a glance at the clock showed him that it was two o'clock. But the same glance extending to the arm-chair opposite revealed Gay, far too deep in dreamland to be reached by the petulant thrills of the electric bell.

Of course, this was the inhuman mother come to claim her offspring, and Oliver struggled into his coat and reached the door just as another impatient touch on the bell vibrated through the flat.

"Where is Gay? How did he come here?"

It was almost an angry voice that interrogated him, and Oliver, instead of conveying a reproof to this person for what he considered her shameful dereliction in her duty to her children, as he had fully intended to do, found himself assuming quite an apologetic tone, as if he had taken an unwarrantable liberty in taking the child in.

The girl's face — it was an unexpectedly young face on which the light fell — looked at Oliver with almost a defiant expression in the dark eyes. She was in evening-dress, he could see, for the large cloak had fallen back over one shoulder, showing a slender girl's arm with a long glove; and she had a knitted handkerchief tied over her head instead of a hat, from which soft rings and curls of dark hair showed themselves.

She declined Oliver's invitation to enter so curtly that he felt an annoying sensation that he had suggested something improper and insulting; and she listened with ill-concealed impatience while he explained the circumstances, and, when he had finished, said ungraciously,

"I am sorry you had so much trouble. Will you let me have the boy now, please?"

"Upon my word!" Oliver thought to himself, "if this is all the thanks one gets for turning nursery-maid and upsetting all one's domestic arrangements, I shall think twice in future before I go in for entertaining angels."

Being unaccustomed to children, Oliver proceeded to attempt to wake Gay as he would a grown-up person. "Hullo, there! Wake up! Here's your mother." But this produced no effect, nor did a hand on the shoulder, nor a gentle shake; so at last Oliver took him up, quilt and all, and carried him out to the door, from which impatient tappings of a foot and a little irritable cough sounded, hurrying his movements.

The girl took him almost roughly out of Oliver's arms. "You're a very naughty little boy, Gay," she said, "and I shall never be able to trust you again."

Her voice, or her efforts to disentangle him from the quilt in which he was wrapped, roused the child to a half-consciousness, but it was only enough to make a sleepy arm clasp her slender neck, and his curly head nestle comfortably against her cheek; which relieved Oliver, in spite of her words, from any apprehension that this neglectful mother might be a Tartar and that the small culprit might have a bad time to expect from her.

The slight arms seemed hardly strong enough to hold the sleeping child's weight, but Oliver would not have ventured to offer to relieve her of it, and he picked up the quilt, which was summarily discarded, and bowed ceremoniously in silence in answer to a few curt words of thanks and apology for the trouble that had been given him; and he closed his own door abruptly, with a little feeling of resentment against this very independent and unconciliatory neighbour of his.

But the sight of the pillow in his arm-chair, still dinted with the pressure of Gay's sleeping head, brought an uneasy feeling that the voice that spoke the ungracious words of thanks was a little tremulous, and the eyes a little moist even in their defiance. There were certainly dark marks under them, the bismuth laid on by that clumsy, heavy-handed lady's-maid, Fatigue, who does not study appearances or effect.

He remembered, too, the slim arms trembling

a little under the child's weight, and a feeling of compunction took him back to the door with the intention, even at the risk of a rebuff, of offering his help in opening hers.

But as he opened his door hers had just closed, and through it came to his ear the sound of heavy sobbing — not the child's, though there was such a young sound in the grief that he made an involuntary step forward as one would to a young thing that might be consoled and comforted, and as one would not to an adult heart that knoweth its own bitterness, with which a stranger may no more intermeddle than with its joy.

He drew back quickly, however, with a sense of impertinent intrusion, for with the sobs came words broken and choking, and kisses showered, he fancied, on sleeping eyes or clinging hands or small bare feet. "Gay, my darling! My little Gay! my boy! my treasure!"

"It's all very well," Oliver said to himself severely as he finally closed his door, "but she should not have left him."

"Do you know anything of the people at No. 9?" Oliver asked Mrs. Sims next morning as she was clearing the breakfast.

"No; nor I don't want to, neither!" Mrs. Sims replied, with that expression of countenance which Oliver knew signified, "I could and if I would and if I might," and that she was longing to have what she knew extracted from her, as it were, upon the rack.

Whenever Oliver saw that look he had a perverse inclination to change the subject and not to bring the desired pressure to bear, or give the additional turn to the screw which would extort from the victim that choice morsel of scandal which she was really longing to impart.

The strained terms existing between Mrs. Sims and the porter cut her off from a good deal of the gossip that flutters up and down the stairs of mansions laid out in flats. She had also quarrelled conclusively with the charwoman, and declined to avail herself of her services under any stress of work, so it was really wonderful how much information, more or less incorrect, she had amassed about her neighbours. I am told that scientific men can construct pre-Adamite monsters in all their hideous proportions out of an uninteresting-looking bone which to an inexperienced eye might appear very unsuggestive; but this is as nothing to the skill

with which Mrs. Sims built up very insufficient data into facts and figures almost as monstrous and hideous.

Now Oliver felt sure, from the unnecessary attention paid to brushing the crumbs off the breakfast-cloth, and from certain little significant sniffs accompanying the process, that Mrs. Sims had some megatherium or pterodactyl set up and finished off to introduce to his notice at No. 9.

Oliver was never inclined in this respect to gratify Mrs. Sims, and somehow the remembrance of Gay sleeping so confidingly in the arm-chair made him less inclined than ever to give the required turn of the rack or thumbscrew to produce the confession already trembling upon the lips of the martyr sweeping up the bread-crumbs, who was one of those lofty characters who will not speak evil of their neighbours unless they are obliged, but rather court that obligation: "Well, Mr. Oliver, since you ask me," and so on.

Accordingly Oliver abruptly changed the subject by inquiring what she was going to give him for dinner, which is the form that ordering the dinner takes generally when the master is doing the housekeeping; and I think this is in reality the attitude of mind of many mistresses also in the presence of that terrific potentate the cook, though the female mind dissembles and tries to keep up an outward appearance of authority.

"And, oh! by the way," Oliver interrupted rather inconsequently when Mrs. Sims was launched into a disquisition on the iniquities of London butchers in general and the one round the corner in particular, "I wish you would get a pot of jam when you're out, and put it in that cupboard. I was looking last night ——"

Oliver stopped here, and Mrs. Sims nearly dropped the crumb-tray in astonishment. Jam! when Master Oliver almost from a baby—ever since, in fact, he took a rhubarb powder disguised in that delicacy—had detested it. Jam! when there was plenty of it in her store cupboard, home-made, brought up from Merrifield, where jam-making was one of the solemn functions of the year. Mrs. Sims could almost have told off which tree in the garden each particular gooseberry and currant came, and smacked her lips with especial relish over raspberries and strawberries rescued from the ravages of

thievish blackbirds and bold, bad, screeching jays.

Even in a flat Mrs. Sims would have her jam cupboard, never having heard of a respectable household without that sacred apartment. And to suggest jam being kept in that particular cupboard consecrated to Oliver's books and papers, which the mere idea of such a sticky neighbour would contaminate! Mrs. Sims looked with some anxiety at her master, fearing lest overmuch study had made his reason's lord sit lightly on his throne, but was distracted from her fears on this point by the remembrance of a dab of butter which she had discovered that morning on the arm of the large chair, and which the application of a hot poker and brown paper had not been able satisfactorily to remove.

But she fancied that she had obtained the explanation of her master's extraordinary demand for jam when he added, just as she was leaving the room, "Colonel and Miss Mostyn are coming to tea one afternoon, so you must get something nice for them."

Mrs. Sims had her little thinks about Miss Mostyn and of what might be the outcome of that providential meeting in Kensington Gardens: thoughts which had only reached the point of smiling and nodding to herself when that young lady's name was mentioned; and of placing the small envelopes which arrived occasionally, directed in the bold caligraphy which used to be masculine and is now distinctly feminine, in a prominent position on Oliver's writing-table; and of dusting with extra care the photograph of Doris which likewise stood there, which represented her in profile looking over her shoulder, with a painfully strong light from the left thrown on her, making the loose hairs on her forehead look like horsehair of unusual coarseness or snakes round the head of Medusa.

"What a pity," Mrs. Sims used to say, contemplating this artistic production—"what a pity as she did not sit down proper to be done, like my Mark, as had his head fixed with an iron thing as hurt a bit but kep' him quite still, and had to look hard at the instrument without winking while the man counted ten. He did oughter have done it over again; and the light all a one side, too. And I'll be bound he charged her a pretty penny."

The reader will judge from Mrs. Sims's attitude in the matter that the romance, if romance it were, between Oliver and Doris Mostyn was in a very incipient state, and had not reached the point where a faithful old servant, looking on, becomes jealous and disparaging and severe on the pretender to her master's affections.

I think if Oliver had shown more eagerness to open those aforesaid little notes, or had been more annoyed when the Medusa photograph had fallen into the waste-paper basket and been mislaid for two or three days, Mrs. Sims would have been less inclined to open a treasured pot of strawberry-jam and to concoct cunning and delicious cakes for his expected guests, so mysterious and often apparently unconnected are cause and effect.

CHAPTER VIII

VISITORS

That neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men . . .
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith. — WORDSWORTH.

FTER Oliver Bruce's first introduction to Gay, he saw nothing more of his neighbours for some days. The resentful feeling left by his interview with Gay's mother made him ignore the opposite doorway with cold indifference, and he felt quite angry with himself because his eye involuntarily glanced at the board in the entrance-hall on which was inscribed the names of the dwellers in the various flats, and he observed (why should he notice such utterly unimportant trifles?) that the name standing over against No. 9 was Mrs. Frampton.

In a general way his memory was very treacherous in the matter of names, but this kept recurring to his mind with tiresome pertinacity, and turning up and catching his eye in all sorts of directions; and, to impress it still more emphatically on his mind, a tradesman's boy with a parcel stopped him as he turned in at the Mansions to enquire of him at which number "a party by the name of Frampton" lived.

It was the afternoon that Doris and Colonel Mostyn came to tea, when he was escorting his visitors downstairs to their carriage, that he for the first time met his next-door neighbours on the stairs. It had been a very successful little entertainment. Mrs. Sims had prepared tea with every variety of cake that her imagination could devise, in rather too great profusion to entirely please Oliver, as compared to the elegance of the meal of which he had partaken more than once in Doris's drawing-room. But Mrs. Sims had not grasped the delicate and refined proportions of afternoon tea, and calculated on people making a good square meal of it.

Doris was looking charming, and quite won Mrs. Sims's heart by the warmth and cordiality of her greeting, which greatly gratified the old servant, and would have pleased Oliver more if he had not been quite sure that Doris was confusing her with another servant who had been with them at The Dene.

"And she remembered my pore 'usban' too," Mrs. Sims told Oliver afterwards; "which I should n't have thought she'd ever seen him. But she recognised him directly minute she saw his photo on my shelf, and she says it was his very moral, and she'd have known him anywhere by them splendid eyes of his'n."

For description of photograph the reader is referred to Chapter I.

"Ah!" Oliver said, swallowing a dreadful tendency to laugh, "she has a good memory."

Mrs. Sims showed Doris round the flat while Colonel Mostyn recovered his breath and more or less of his temper, which had been seriously affected by his climb up the stairs. Indeed, when he reached the third landing he registered a vow that he was blessed (only he used another word) if he ever came there again.

Doris, having less to carry up four flights of stairs, arrived at the top as graceful and unruffled as usual, and pleased Mrs. Sims by her admiration of all the arrangements in the flat, which the old woman displayed as if they were

quite unique and peculiar to No. 8 Parley Mansions, instead of being identical with those in hundreds and thousands of other flats.

When she returned, Colonel Mostyn had somewhat recovered his composure and abated the puffing and blowing, and was sitting, not in Gay's arm-chair, which Oliver had pressed upon him, but in a more erect one that suited his figure better, and was in the middle of one of his fine old crusted stories, to which Oliver listened with all the polite attention of a prospective son-in-law.

Doris had an elegant and ingenious way of coming to the rescue when her father was boring people, introducing another subject with a pretty apology that took the sting out of the interruption to the old man, a caressing touch on his coat-sleeve or an adjustment of his watchchain on his ample waistcoat; and now a speck of dust on the collar of his coat was adroitly used for Oliver's benefit at the very point of the story, a part which Colonel Mostyn frequently omitted, and he subsided, one chin sinking into another, and that into a third, till they all rested comfortably on his waistcoat.

"Mrs. Sims has been showing me all your

arrangements, and they are quite delightful. I declare I feel quite envious, and have a great mind to make father give notice to leave our house and take a flat. Oh! by the way, Oliver, do you know anything of your next-door neighbours? Frampton is the name, is n't it?—Do you really want me to pour out tea? Of course I will."

But Oliver's artful diversion in the direction of the tea-tray was of no avail, for Doris returned to the charge.

"I have been asking Mrs. Sims about your neighbours, for I think I must have met them on the stairs—a curious-looking, dark woman and two pretty children. She looks as if she might be on the stage; is n't she?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Oliver said, with an unnecessary tone of indifference, which caught Doris's ear at once. "In London one knows nothing of one's neighbours."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that," Doris demurred. "I'm afraid I'm a good deal interested in the people next door to us, though we don't actually know them; and in flats it's almost like being in the same house. — No more cake, thank you, though it's really quite too delicious. And

don't beguile father with that tea-cake or he will be laid up to-morrow with the gout. — Won't you, dear?"

A plate of cake judiciously handed is very useful for turning conversation out of unwelcome channels, and Oliver thought he had successfully shelved the subject of his opposite neighbour.

But as ill-luck would have it, when the Mostyns were taking their departure, and Oliver, as I have said, was escorting them downstairs, cheerful children's voices were heard echoing up the well of the staircase, and ripples of young laughter.

"What a noise!" said Doris. "If there is much of this it must interfere with your work, does n't it?"

At an age when both feet have to be firmly planted on a step before you essay the next, it takes some time to surmount several flights of stairs, and one of the party coming up had occasionally to resort to all-fours, using hands as well as feet in the progress. One hand also was occupied with a treasure that could not be entrusted to any one else, so reaching the upper floor was a work of time. Gay, being more

accustomed to such feats of agility as that of going up and down stairs, accomplished the journey with greater rapidity, and had to wait for his more leisurely companion on each landing, calling back encouragement to Do, behind whom Mrs. Frampton followed closely to prevent the risk of what looked from above as simply a very large sun-bonnet tilting suddenly backwards.

But when Oliver and his guests met them, they were all together in a group on the second landing quite impeding the thoroughfare, each child clamouring for the mother's exclusive attention and admiration for a large Dutch doll whose angular form, devoid of clothing, was flourished before her face.

Mrs. Frampton drew the children out of the way, and gave Oliver a little, stiff bow of recognition, noted by Doris in connection with Oliver's somewhat exaggerated disclaimer of having any acquaintance with his neighbours; while Gay greeted him as quite an old friend, and invited his inspection of the doll's simply constructed face, with one eye much higher up than the other, and the hectic colour in the cheeks encroaching at one side on the back of the neck.

After they had passed Oliver heard Gay pointing him out to Do as "the nice bogy what gave him 'licious cocoa with three, five, six lumps of sugar in it;" and no doubt Doris heard it too, though Oliver talked fast and rather incoherently to prevent her doing so.

"Bless my soul! what's that?"

A thud on the top of the Colonel's well-brushed hat drew forth the ejaculation, and on looking up, Oliver was aware of two little peeping faces, one with a halo of white sun-bonnet and the other with ruddy curls and a Tam-o'-Shanter, watching him from above, and two Dutch dolls held through the railings to feast their inexpressive dots of eyes on the delightful object who could put unlimited sugar into the cup of life.

These were suddenly withdrawn from view, while Oliver, with many apologies, removed a very sticky raspberry-drop from the glossy surface of the hat, the owner of which was a good deal more ruffled than his property.

Oliver detected a slightly inquiring glance on Doris's face as he put her into the carriage, and though it was only a look, and perhaps excusable under the circumstances, he resented it. What right had Doris Mostyn, or any one, to exercise a sort of inquisitorial inquiry into his acquaintance? He certainly was not bound to explain to her the very slight knowledge he had of this neighbour of his.

That was sometimes the way in old times when he and Doris were playing in The Dene nursery. She would suddenly lay claim to something he was occupied with, or annex one of his specimens for the microscope, and the nurse would say, "There, Master Oliver! don't be disagreeable. Let little missy have what she wants."

And the same would occur in later years when they were playing another game; a little imperious interference on her part would occasionally disturb the pleasant calm of their intercourse. So Oliver went back to his flat a little irritable and out of tune; while Doris as she drove back pondered and drew conclusions.

CHAPTER IX

POPPIES

Poppies like these, I own, are rare; And of such nightingales' songs beware.

H, what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to deceive!" Oliver had not the slightest intention at first of making a mystery of his very slight acquaintance with his next-door neighbour. Why should he? He was quite prepared to join in any hard thing that might be said of such negligence, and to agree that there was something decidedly unconventional in Mrs. Frampton's appearance which might perhaps be suggestive of the stage. He was not at all inclined to take up the cudgels for her against an ill-natured and suspicious world, and Doris's mild, amiable curiosity about her hardly came under this head.

It was almost accidental that he had not mentioned to Mrs. Sims Gay's midnight visit, and it had several times been on the tip of his tongue to describe the funny little episode to Doris; and

now here he was started with what no doubt Doris would imagine a mysterious theatrical acquaintance about whom he wished to keep her in the dark, and had told what must have appeared to her an untruth when he declared he knew nothing at all of some one with whom he was on bowing terms, and whose children hailed him with cordial intimacy.

And this being the case, of course he proceeded to make things look more suspicious by getting red and stammering when he was excusing himself from going to the Mostyns' which he had done hitherto with the greatest sang-froid, merely saying that he had some writing that occupied him. Now he blundered out something about an engagement, when a few minutes before he had said he knew nobody but themselves.

Another day he made, as he told himself, a regular fool of himself when he met Doris as he was carrying home some flowers to put in his own room. He had often vowed he would never waste any more money on flowers, for, as I have said, his own arrangement of them was unsatisfactory, and Mrs. Sims's still more so. But to-day he had been tempted by some

particularly cheerful-looking Shirley poppies, so bright and light-hearted and gay that you could not help smiling when you looked at them; and they were as unlike millinery or cauliflowers as possible; and he was carrying home a loose bunch of them, with some copper beech for a background, when he met Doris.

"What lovely flowers!" she said; and then he behaved, as he justly said, like an ass, and Doris at once adroitly—rather too adroitly—changed the subject.

Why is there something rather effeminate and contemptible about a man arranging flowers? Why should it be rather amusingly lady-like in him to do so? So Oliver was ashamed to say they were for his own special delectation, and accordingly Doris flew to the conclusion that they were a present for some one, and remembered the dark-faced girl on the stairs, and the embarrassed bow exchanged between her and Oliver; and with a flash of intuition he realised what she thought, and would have liked to throw the miserable flowers into the gutter, since he could not possibly now offer them to Doris.

That meeting took all the dainty beauty out of the poppies, the silken crumple from their petals and the laughing radiance of their colours, and he resolved to hand them over to Mrs. Sims to do her kitchen-garden worst with them.

But, as he reached his own door, Gay was standing in front of the opposite flat, just starting for or returning from a walk, and Oliver on the impulse of the moment put the flowers into his arms, which received them rapturously, while Oliver immediately realised that in so doing he had verified to the letter the suspicions he had seen in Doris's eyes.

"Did you know it was Do's burfday?" said Gay.

"Oh Gay!" expostulated a voice behind, "you didn't ask for those flowers, did you? Give them back at once."

The child's face clouded from its innocent delight, but he crossed the landing and, with rather a piteous little face, held out the flowers to Oliver, who was fumbling with his latchkey, trying to disappear from the scene, and of course finding unusual difficulty in opening the door.

"Nonsense!" he said. "It's a birthday present to Do."

And then the door came open, and he bolted in to avoid any further parley on the subject.

But a few minutes later, when he had almost forgotten the matter, there came a ring at the bell, followed by a prolonged conversation with Mrs. Sims at the door; beginning, as Oliver's ear, versed in the changes in the old woman's temper, could detect, with acidity, and softening down perceptibly as it went on.

"Here's two little mites of children from over the way," she announced presently. "They've brought some flowers, but I can't make head or tail of what they says; but they're as pretty a little pair as ever trod shoe-leather."

"Show them in," said Oliver; and in walked a large bunch of poppies and two little children hand in hand,

If Gay had only wanted wings and a bow and arrow to make a ready-equipped Cupid of him at his first visit, there was only wanting now a robin to finish off the picture of the Babes in the Wood. There was a pretty little air of protection about Gay, and Do looked up at him from under the penthouse of her big bonnet with evident confidence in his manly fortitude.

"Please," began Gay rather breathlessly, and repeating what had evidently been carefully taught him to say—"please, thank you"



'We've brought back your bootiful flowers.'



("P'ease, sankoo," echoed Do). "We've brought back your bootiful flowers" ("Boofter f'owers," echoed Do); "and Maisie is much obliged, but she'd rather we didn't have them."

"Not have 'em," repeated Do despondently, shaking the large sun-bonnet.

Oliver made no offer to take the flowers. "It seems rather a pity," he said reflectively, "for I shall only throw them in the dust-hole."

"Where?" simultaneously from both children.

"The dust-hole."

"Where's that?" in awed interest; and then Oliver remembered that dust-holes are as unknown in flats as are pig-tubs, dear to a country servant's heart.

"Oh, it's a dreadful place, with egg-shells and old shoes and cabbage-stalks."

"Do you always put your flowers there?"

"Frequently. Where do you?"

"Well, we don't often have any, but when we does we puts them in glasses and basins with water — lot's and lots of water."

"Well, could n't you put the poppies in lots and lots of water? They look thirsty, poor things, already."

- "Yes, but Maisie won't let us."
- "Why does she hate the poor things so?"
- "She don't hate them. She loves them dreadful! She cried over them like she does over us sometimes when we cuddle her up. I do believe," said Gay, pointing a short finger at one petal, "that was where she cried, a great big round tear. She says they used to grow in the garden at home, lots and lots of them - great big trees covered with them," romanced Gay, infirm in his botanical knowledge, "She kissed one dear little yellow one; but that is n't here," said Gay, lowering his voice confidentially. dropped that — quite by accident, you know - in our passage, because I thought she'd like to have it; and it was only a little one, and I thought you'd never miss it. She let us come because it was Do's burfday, and because ---- "
 - "'Oo cried," interpolated Do.
- "No, it was n't!" indignantly. "Boys don't cry. I'm not afraid to go to bed in the dark."

An apparently irrelevant remark, which, however, caused the sun-bonnet to droop guiltily as if the shot had told.

Oliver thereupon turned the subject by invit-

ing them to take a seat, and producing a hassock for Do, while Gay, with the air of a habitué, managed to mount the arm-chair where he had slept on his previous visit.

"I always tell Do," Gay went on, "when we're in bed every night, about my being shut outside the door all alone, and how I heard some one coming up the stairs, stump, stump! stump, stump!"

It was instructive to Oliver to hear his footsteps described in this solid manner.

"Do always screams when I come to that part, and when it is very dark I take hold of her hand, for Maisie don't like her to be frightened. So I make haste on to the cocoa and the lumps of sugar; and I tell her," continued Gay in a highly elderly and patronising manner, "when she's a great big girl perhaps she might come in and see all the bootiful picture-books what you've got."

Oliver looked at his sober, respectable volumes under the novel aspect of a collection of gaily illustrated "Cock Robin" and "Cat's Tea-party," etc.

"So Maisie said as it was her birthday she might come with me and help bring the flowers back, if she'd be very good and not ask for things."

Not asking for things was evidently a work of great difficulty with Do, whose sun-bonnet had come untied and dropped back so that Oliver had a better view of her face, with the lips screwed up tight as if demands might come rushing out if the rosy mouth opened for a moment; but luckily the strain on her self-control was relaxed by the appearance of Mrs. Sims, with a somewhat ashamed and apologetic expression, with a jug of lemonade and cake, "as may as well be eaten up as not."

As it was exactly what Oliver had wished but hardly liked to suggest, he was able to receive it with a lenient and indulgent manner, as of one giving in to an old servant's vagaries; and she received his suggestions that the children would make a good many crumbs with scorn, as if she could n't brush it up in a couple of minutes "as had n't got so fidgety and cross-grained as that comes to to have everything just so!"

I am afraid that thrilling story, with which Gay had beguiled Do's half-sleeping fancy for so many nights, was altogether superseded by Do's personal experience of the delights of a visit to "Bogy." Bread-and-butter and cocoa became quite tame and uninteresting articles of food compared to cake and lemonade, which was so sweet that the children were sure hundreds of lumps of sugar must have been put into it.

As the children would not agree to take the flowers back with them, and the poppies were evidently in need of refreshment, and Oliver did not think they would appreciate lemonade, Gay and Do undertook to put them in water for him, just to show him how they did it, and to save them from that mysterious place the dusthole.

And again Mrs. Sims submitted with a won-derfully good grace to a great deal of messing in and out of the bathroom, and tied on two of her aprons, fastened round the children's necks, to protect their frocks; for in arranging flowers the youthful operator — a fact perhaps not known to the ignorant adult — is apt to become wet to the skin.

The ultimate effect of the arrangement was not all that could be desired, as Do was not sufficiently particular as to which end of the flowers she put in the water, and Gay had strenuous methods of dealing with flowers which

poppy stems are of too fragile a build to endure; and poppy petals were scattered broadcast over the floors, like *confetti* after a wedding.

The children were quite oblivious of time, cake and lemonade having silenced that loud-striking clock of youthful appetite which is generally very distinct at dinner-time. Mrs. Sims appeared equally so, for Oliver's luncheon-hour was approaching and the only thing on the kitchen-table, which was generally at that time devoted to mysterious culinary implements, was Do, with one fat bare foot being dried by Mrs. Sims, the sock and shoe pertaining to it being put to dry in front of the kitchen fire after immersion in a water-can into which the child had casually stepped.

But at last the children took their departure, hastened by a peremptory ring at the bell and a request that they would come back at once, and the flat once more reverted to its usual tidy silence. Mrs. Sims swept up the crumbs and poppy petals with a renewed severity of manner, and Oliver settled down after his disturbed morning and delayed luncheon to an afternoon's work, distracted even now by a few poppy petals in his blotting-paper, and by one flower put to

draw up doubtful refreshment from his inkbottle, and by the remembrance, as he reached down one of his books for reference, that he might be consulting "Who killed Cock Robin?" or "Thank you, pretty cow."

CHAPTER X

UNDER A SPELL

Slight shocks of young love-liking interposed,
Whose transient pleasure mounted to the head,
And tingled thro' the veins.—WORDSWORTH.

N spite of Oliver Bruce's feeling of resentment at Doris's unfounded suspicions about himself and his next-door neighbour — suspicions which, by the way, he had very little reason for imputing to her, and which, after all, might have been purely imaginary — he was rather relieved to receive a friendly little note from her next morning asking him to accompany her to an "At Home," one afternoon in the following week, at Lady Ventnor's at Rutland Gate.

"There will be some good music," she added, "which I am sure you will enjoy."

Now, of all things that Oliver loathed, a fashionable "At Home" was the object on which he bestowed his most bitter hatred. His experience of such things had been, to be sure, very limited, only having on very rare occasions accompanied his mother in a spirit of martyrdom to gardenparties, which present a very mitigated form of the infliction.

If it had not been for that bunch of poppies, and the effect they had manifestly produced on Doris, he would have declined the invitation without a moment's hesitation, saying that it was not at all in his line, and that he should feel like a fish out of water among all the smart people. But instead of this he wrote a cordial little note of acceptance, and despatched it before he had time to alter his mind or fully realise what an unutterable bore it would be, and sternly repressed the inclination to send some excuse and get out of it.

He thought a good deal of Doris that week, of how pretty and graceful she was, and of how much his mother had liked her. He kept her little note of invitation in his breast-pocket till he suddenly wanted a bit of paper to light his pipe; and Mrs. Sims found him looking with intentness at the Medusa portrait on his writingtable, and smiled meaningly to herself, not knowing that he was really looking at a dry poppy stem that had somehow become fixed between the glass and the frame.

Of the children he saw nothing, though he was aware one day as he came out of his door that the opposite one was open just a crack, and eyes below the level of the door-handle peeping out; but before there was time for any recognition a severe voice called the child away, and the door was abruptly closed.

Another day he found a monkey of Gay's, which had got detached from the stick upon which it was wont to perform acrobatic feats and was lying on the landing. Oliver picked it up, smoothed its contorted limbs, and slipped it into the letter-box.

One evening he met Mrs. Frampton on the stairs as he came up, and heard the swish of silk skirts under the long cloak that evidently covered her evening-dress. She turned away her head and took no notice of his frigid salutation, which veiled the indignation he felt at her desertion of the two that Mrs. Sims had described as the prettiest little pair that ever trod shoe-leather. Doris would not treat her children so! He remembered the tenderness she had displayed when Jill the dachshund was ill, and how she had shown almost unnecessary solicitude over the chocolate invalid, who was

very lackadaisical and piteous after overeating herself disgustingly. It was quite pleasant to turn to the contemplation of Doris, with her natural feminine nature and simple ordinary life, after his occasional glimpses of this curious neighbour of his, with those tragic dark eyes and the touch of mystery about her that is so repugnant to English feelings. Maisie, the children called her. It was a pretty name, and recalled those lines of Sir Walter Scott's which had always been favourites of his:

"Proud Maisie is in the wood, Walking so early; Sweet Robin sits on a bush, Singing so rarely."

This slim, dark-faced girl — for she looked little more — rather realised his idea of proud Maisie, and there was a little defiant bearing of the head that suited the character.

But how stupid it was to allow children to call their parents all sorts of fanciful names! Why could they not be content with the dear old homely titles of "father" and "mother" of former days? "Papa" and "mamma" seem also unobjectionable, though perhaps smacking of the parlour behind the shop, or of a speak-

ing-doll when you pull a string among her petticoats; and even "momma" and "poppa" from across the Atlantic are endurable. But it is part of the prevailing tendency of this irreverent age to drop titles of respect, and to ignore the fifth commandment, and make mock at the duty of ordering ourselves lowly and reverently to all our betters, even if it allows for a moment that elders can be betters.

I am afraid that when Oliver awoke on the morning of the 25th of May he felt almost as if he wished the earth would open and swallow up Rutland Gate, as it appeared that nothing short of that would give him an excuse for getting out of an engagement that was so distasteful to him. Blizzards are not likely in May; though, to be sure, the unlikely is generally what happens in this mysterious climate of ours. A mere thunder-storm or pouring rain are insufficient excuses in a world of hansoms with drivers in shiny waterproof capes.

But a curious change of feeling came over him when once he had started—a change that I can only set down to the subtle magic in the spring that at times steals into the quietest veins and sets the most regular, sober blood dancing in an unaccountable manner. Looking back on that afternoon, Oliver felt as if he must have fallen under some temporary enchantment. Had Puck been squeezing the magic herb into his eyes? Were donkey's ears concealed under his well-brushed hat? But at the time he only felt a sudden buoyancy of spirits. The day was as beautiful as an English May day can be, which is saying a great deal; and May can be as beautiful in London as elsewhere, say what you will of smoke and dinginess.

When he reached the Park everything looked so fresh and bright, and the grass so blessedly green, and the trees a good fortnight ahead of their country cousins, but still displaying all sorts of refreshing and varied tints before June and smoke had toned them down to one dingy green, and given them that blasé, fatigued look they display later in the season like many other beauties. The great banks of rhododendron were at their best; big masses of crimson of many shades picked out here and there by fiery azaleas, "taking the eye with their beauty;" while up above the sky was sapphire-blue, "so cloudless, clear, and purely beautiful that God alone was to be seen in heaven."

A dirty, evil-looking tramp was sitting on the grass just inside one of the gates, blinking up at the sky with blood-shot, ferrety eyes, and stretching out dusty, cracked boots on the green grass: a blot on the fair scene, but giving Oliver an odd kind of fellow feeling and a transitory wish to express it to this brother of his, who, however, squirmed under Oliver's look, and getting up, turned a ragged shoulder and shambled away.

Oliver caught sight of him again as he drove with Doris to Rutland Gate. Doris saw him too.

"What a dreadful-looking creature!" she said, with a shudder. "They ought not to allow such people in the parks."

Doris was looking her very best, and I wish I were capable of describing her toilet, as I am sure it was worthy of full and particular chronicling. The prevailing colour was pale pink, and there was a good deal of lace and frilling about it, requiring more agility in her companion than Oliver possessed to avoid treading upon it.

I believe there is nothing more trying to the human temper than having your dress trodden upon. It is lucky for men that they are not exposed to the trial, though I believe Irishmen court the experience by dragging long coat-tails

at Donnybrook Fair. With women it so often happens, too, when the mind of the wearer should be in a specially saintly state of exaltation above sublunary matters; as, for example, when coming out of church, when a sudden jerk, and perhaps a heart-rending sound of a slit, brings the mind abruptly from its heavenward soarings down to the world of hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness—feelings which have to be concealed under a painful smile and an apparently amiable acceptance of the unavailing apologies offered.

But Doris was in a particularly beaming condition that day, and not a cloud ruffled her brow though twice Oliver had to apologise for trifling damage done.

"I am not quite sure," she said as he helped her into the victoria and took his place at her side—"I am not quite sure of the propriety of this proceeding. But father hates these 'At Homes' so much that an invitation to one immediately brings on a twinge of gout. Besides" (with a quick little look at him and a blush—or was it the pink lining of her parasol?), "I thought that such old friends as you and I, Oliver, did not require a chaperon."

"Such old friends?" Oliver answered, with just a note of interrogation in the final word that suggested there might be something more than friendship; and he really felt it.

Tennyson tells us that —

"In the spring a brighter iris mantles on the burnished dove; In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love."

And certainly there was a something in the day that made Oliver's blood thrill in his veins with a life and youthfulness unusual to his placid nature, making him feel no longer a looker-on taking note of the follies and vagaries of human nature, but an actor in the drama of life himself, with follies and vagaries of his own if need be, but still living his own life and getting the sweetness and strength of its possibilities out of it.

And one of its possibilities — why, come to that, its main possibility! — is love, and Oliver turned with that warm thrill in his veins to the girl sitting beside him. A gauzy ribbon fluttered against his cheek, a luscious, sweet fragrance of the lilies she wore in her dress surrounded him like an enchantment, and his eyes met hers just for a moment and caught a look in their blue depths that made his heart beat thick and fast,

and that brought words rushing impetuously to his tongue, which stammered and stuttered under this strange influence, not being accustomed to be the medium of such deliriously sweet feelings.

How short the drive seemed! How swiftly that usually dignified and leisurely bay mare must have gone to reach Rutland Gate in such an incredibly short time! John Gilpin's speed must have been nothing to it. And yet there had been time for a good deal to be said, and also for one of those eloquent silences when a small hand over which his had closed was drawn a little shyly from his hold, with a subtly conveyed impression of reluctance, as if the contact was not unpleasant to her.

How much had he said? What had he left unsaid with that clumsy instrument which is all nature has provided for man to carve out the dainty tracery of love? He could not quite remember what had been put into words during that brief transport, or what had throbbed from heart to heart while their hands touched, before he helped her out of the carriage at the door with the awning over it, and the carpet laid down, and the rows of liveried servants on either side.

He admired the art with which she shook out her pretty frills and skirts, reminding him of the white pigeons on the lawn at The Dene stroking and preening their dainty plumage in the sunshine.

The enchantment was still upon him as he followed her up the wide staircase and was introduced to the elegant but somewhat exhausted-looking hostess who stood at the drawing-room door, and whose cheeks must have ached with the wreathed smiles she had been bestowing on the serried ranks of her guests, and whose brain must have been whirling with the attempt to make some appropriate remark to each.

I think she called Doris "a naughty girl" for being so late, and told Oliver that it was "perfectly sweet" of him to bring her, not having the faintest idea who either of them was.

And then they edged their way into the tightly packed drawing-room, where by some happy chance Oliver ultimately discovered a seat for Doris in a window where he could stand beside her without being pushed and hustled, as is the amiable custom in polite society, notably, I am told, at royal functions.

"Talk of providing seats for shop-girls!"

Oliver heard an important-looking dowager protest. "It's a pity charity does n't begin at home. I don't care what you say, but next time I shall bring a camp-stool. If any one would set the fashion, every one would take to them like ducks to the water. It would be an uncommonly good idea for bazaars - ornamental sort of camp-stools for afternoon crushes."

But Oliver was still under the glamour and saw everything in a rose-coloured light: the large rooms, so handsomely decorated; the mirrors and pictures; the masses of flowers at every available coign of vantage; the fragrance they diffused in the air; the animated - some of them lovely — faces; the soft, refined voices; the little scraps of conversation that reached his ears. And to feel not a mere interested lookeron, but part and parcel of the gay scene, with Doris, as pretty and attractive as any one there, looking up at him and listening to what he said as if she wanted no better entertainment!

Truth to tell, he was quite amazed at his own powers of small talk and at what smart things came to his lips. The old shy, stay-at-home Oliver, somewhere in the background, listened with an odd sort of contemptuous admiration to all the amusing nonsense this man talked. He felt so absurdly young — too young to think, as the old Oliver constantly did, that he might be making a fool of himself. Doris more than once looked up at him curiously, noticing the change, which, however, appeared to her distinctly a change for the better.

"I always said," she told herself, "that he only wanted waking up a bit, and this shows I was right."

Then there was a pause in the general conversation as the music began — only a pause, I regret to say; the talk began again in subdued tones almost immediately, for the English are not naturally a musical or polite nation. Doris herself would not have been unwilling to continue the conversation with Oliver, under cover of those long, thrilling, passionately pathetic violin notes that sobbed through the room, if she had not seen that he was listening spell-bound, having stopped in the very middle of a sentence, even of a word, when the music began. He was hardly aware that he had ceased speaking, for the music seemed expressing the feeling that words had been so impotent to convey.

He had been thinking as they drove along side

by side through the sweet spring weather how badly human beings were provided with means to express their more exquisite feelings, and how infinitely more expressive was the ecstatic rapture of a lark's love-song or, perhaps still better, the tender notes of the nightingale.

Now the violin tones seemed to come to his aid and to be speaking straight from his heart to—

Doris had recognised some one across the room and was smiling and bowing, and a little chill came over Oliver, and for the first time he noticed that the room was insufferably hot, and that the heat was making itself apparent in the complexion of a lady sitting near, whose make-up had been an exquisite work of art.

And just then a sudden movement of the crowd opened a vista across the room for a moment and Oliver's eyes met, in a lightning flash, a pair of big dark eyes that seemed speaking the very sentiment of the music, and yet, in some curious way, appeared familiar to him; and then the crowd surged back and hid those "mutual eyes" from him.

It was some one sitting close to the piano, near which the violinist stood, but him Oliver could not see. Doris had told him that Herr Herzleid was to play, and that he was very much the fashion just then and greatly sought after; and he heard some girls hard by criticising the performance in subdued but distinct tones, till he would have liked to smack them for their insolent tone of patronage. They were connoisseurs and used musical slang which was High Dutch to Oliver, but he gathered that on the whole they approved of the performance, and compared it favourably with other violinists of whom they spoke as of world-wide renown, but of whom Oliver had never heard.

"Who is the girl who always accompanies him now?"

"I have n't a notion. A daughter or niece, I fancy."

"Awfully sympathetic!"

"Ye-es. A shade colourless?"

Oliver had not even realised that there was an accompaniment, which was perhaps the greatest compliment he could have paid her, showing how piano and violin spoke in one.

But just then the last tremulous, liquid note melted out of Oliver's hearing, and after a languid sound of applause the buzz of conversation broke out with renewed vigour. Oliver suggested to Doris that they should fling themselves into the mêlée in the dining-room in search of an ice or a cup of tea.

They were just setting off on this arduous adventure when the man whom Doris had recognised across the room made his way to them, and was introduced to Oliver as Mr. Shirley.

"If you are contemplating tea," he said, "be warned in time. Sardines are as nothing to the state of affairs downstairs. If you get wedged in there and by any happy chance become possessed of an ice, you can't possibly get it up to your mouth till it has reached the same temperature as the tea. I met a lady friend of mine who had just emerged, and who is naturally of a portly and commanding appearance, but, upon my word! I hardly recognised her; she was a ghost of her former self, flattened to a mere silhouette. I strongly advise waiting till the general public have satisfied their ravenous cravings. And besides, Herr Herzleid will play again directly. He only comes for a short time, as no doubt he has half-a-dozen other engagements this afternoon; and, when he goes, this seething crowd will melt away like a snowball,

and we can consume whatever the locusts have left undevoured at our leisure—tepid tea, curledup cucumber sandwiches, and puddles of strawberry syrup that was once ice."

And while Ralph Shirley talked, rattling on in an amusing sort of strain, Oliver was relapsing more and more into the old Oliver, the looker-on, the stander-by, one of the audience, an interested spectator — a little bored, a little cynical, a little shy and self-conscious — aware of the powder on the pretty faces, of the wires among the flowers, the humbug in the compliments, the vanity and vexation of spirit underlying all the gaiety that had been so exhilarating half-an-hour before

Doris, though she was not acutely sensitive, was aware of the change in him, and attributed it, with a little gratification, to jealousy of Ralph Shirley, who certainly had an ease of manner that Oliver did not possess, and who was, moreover, good-looking, and indicated by his looks and manner that he thought her so.

She tried to draw Oliver into the talk, but a trio in conversation is a difficult thing to maintain, whatever it may be in music, and Oliver by degrees dropped out of it and allowed, perhaps

not unwillingly, some one to edge in between him and Doris; so that when the music began again a pair of broad, satin-clad shoulders intervened between him and her, and would have prevented the exchange of any sympathetic glances even if he had sought them.

This time, however, the music was of a quick and lively character, full of young life and singing birds and dancing feet and children's laughter. The critical young ladies had moved out of earshot, so Oliver had not the benefit or the irritation of their remarks, and only knew that he felt the impetus and swing and lilt of the music, and laughed softly to himself, feeling a little breathless as the gay notes scampered past.

And again the intervening people moved so that he could see the dark eyes again, smiling, but, as it were, in spite of themselves, with the infectious merriment of the air. Now he could see that she was sitting at the piano and accompanying the violinist; and he saw, moreover, that the familiarity that had struck him was accounted for by the fact that it was his next-door neighbour, Mrs. Frampton.

As Oliver put Doris into her carriage he had

an uneasy feeling that she expected something more than the slightly formal words of thanks for a delightful afternoon. His tongue seemed even less the pen of a ready writer than usual, though earlier in the afternoon it appeared to have broken its bonds—though, even so, to be unable to express half he felt. Now both tongue and feeling alike seemed to fail him, and he excused himself almost feverishly from going back to dine with her and the Colonel, and thought with downright longing of the flat and his old smoking-coat and pipe.

"You promised," she said, with a little reproachful look. "There was something you said you wanted to tell me."

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly, availing himself of the impatience of a coachman with a prancing pair of horses just behind, waiting to come up to the steps, to cut short their parting words; "there is something. May I come tomorrow—to-morrow afternoon?"

"Come to tea," she said; "I shall be alone."

CHAPTER XI

NEXT MORNING

We climb out of bed with a frouzly head
And a snarly yarly voice;
We shiver and scowl and we grunt and we growl
At our bath and our boots and our toys;
And there ought to be a corner for me
(And I know there is one for you)
When we get the hump—
Cameelious hump—
The hump that is black and blue.— RUDYARD KIPLING.

T is very childish to wake up the morning after a day of pleasure in a bad temper, but I do not think the tendency is by any means confined to children. It is not only dissipation, either, that leaves a headache and a bad taste in the mouth; it is not only the apples of Sodom that turn to ashes. With some natures even the most innocent and simple-minded gaiety of heart is succeeded by a corresponding period of depression, and on the day after the pantomime, or what corresponds to it in adult life, grown-up children are apt to be very fractious and tiresome, and to quarrel with their bread-

and-butter, and sadly need the drastic treatment of the nursery — to be well smacked and put in the corner to recover their mental equilibrium.

Now, what bread-and-butter could be spread on life's hospitable board of a more satisfactory and alluring description than that which Oliver awoke to on that May morning succeeding the "At Home" at Lady Ventnor's? And yet that contrary and perverse individual groaned and drew the clothes over his head and pretended not to hear Mrs. Sims's knock at the door and intimation that she had brought his hot water.

In speaking of bread-and-butter I am not alluding to the kidneys and bacon, an appetising whiff of which reached his ungrateful nostrils a very few minutes later — though at that, too, he sickened, and protested that the smell of cooking in these flats was intolerable — but that banquet of the gods over which Hymen presides, and where, I suppose, nectar and ambrosia would be the natural food provided.

I fancy that an impartial judge would have said that Oliver was an extremely lucky fellow; for, after all, there was nothing particularly attractive about him either in mind, body, or estate — certainly not the latter. As I have said, his means were very distinctly limited, and did not seem likely to improve, for the publishers did not seem so carried away by the merits of his book as Mrs. Bruce would have confidently expected.

So why Doris Mostyn should have thought fit to smile such sweet encouragement on him it was hard to say, for she was undoubtedly pretty and attractive, and had a nice little dot to gild the pill, if gilding were required, and expectations of a good deal more at her father's death. She was not like a schoolgirl, either, who would be pleased with the attentions of a pair of tongs clad in coat and trousers. She must have had in the past ten years many admirers both of herself and her money. Any reasonable person would say she was making a very bad match, and might have done much better; but she had come out of her way to be friendly to him, had endured little rudenesses and roughnesses and awkwardnesses on his part, curt refusals of invitations, obvious excuses to get out of engagements. Any one but Doris would have turned her back on such an ungracious swain.

In that brief delirium yesterday Oliver had

felt desperate penitence for all his shortcomings towards her in the past, and a passionate desire to make amends in the future, and a tender wonder as to what she could see in such a fellow to care for, and a thrilling, intoxicating sense that she *did* care.

I suppose in old days that strange exultation of feeling would have been ascribed to a love-philtre, and its abrupt end explained by the potion not having been strong enough to last. Sometimes one would be glad to explain things in this unintelligible world as simply as did our forefathers, and then what could have been easier than to send round to the drug-store of the period, or the pharmaceutical chemist, or witch or warlock or necromancer, and to have the prescription made up anew—"Shake the bottle;" "To be taken three times a day," and so on?

But as it was, Oliver lay in bed and groaned and wished that all sorts of impossible things might happen to prevent that interview in the. afternoon, when the chains that already galled and oppressed him would be ultimately riveted, and he was no Samson to break them off his arms, but must grind in the prison-house. That was a nice way, was it not? of regarding his future residence in Eldon Crescent — which I believe the advertisements describe as a "commodious family mansion"—in the society of a handsome, well-dowered wife.

Mrs. Sims was groaning, too, over the overdone kidneys reduced to india-rubber with crisp edges, and, with an odd prophetical inspiration, she thought he wanted a wife to keep him in order, "as did n't use to be such a lie-abed in his ma's time, keeping the breakfast-things about all the morning."

She began sweeping in the passage outside viciously, with that knocking of the broom against the skirting-board that is so particularly trying to irritable nerves; and when the young lady in the flat below began to practise trills and turns in a penetrating soprano, Oliver was obliged in self-defence to get up, though he would have liked to convince himself that some sudden illness had deprived him of the power of motion.

He felt more of a man when he was shaved. There is something very demoralising about a prickly chin, and I believe a good many mean and cowardly and unworthy thoughts are car-

ried off by the edge of the razor; so perhaps it is safer morally not to grow a beard.

He picked up the photograph of Doris which he had upset, not quite unintentionally, the evening before, and replaced it on his writingtable with a compunction almost amounting to tenderness.

He put the gardenia she had given him as a button-hole into water, carefully untwisting the cruel wire that cut into its stem and pierced its vitals, and thereby causing a general collapse of the whole flower.

He was firm with himself, and would not allow his thoughts to dodge about after any loop-hole of escape from what he felt must be the inevitable result of his afternoon's visit to Doris. He would not even allow himself to acknowledge that he wished to get out of the noose, or indeed that it was a noose at all, into which he had wilfully pushed his unlucky head in a moment of infatuation. With premature austerity he cut off one or two little free-and-easy bachelor habits in which he had hitherto been used to indulge, and would not permit himself to repine. He checked himself with a sort of rueful amusement when he found him-

self whistling the Dead March in Saul, and substituted Mendelssohn's Wedding March, which came out rather flat.

He could not settle to his writing, but on such a momentous day that was excusable. He had a vague, haunting feeling that he should not do much more with that book of his; for a man who hangs up his hat in a well-to-do wife's house and lives on her money for the rest of his comfortable days has to give a quid pro quo of unoccupied time to dance attendance on all her whims and fancies. He loyally told himself that Doris had not many whims, that she was a reasonable girl who would not exact more than the just and equitable pound of flesh, and that he had undoubtedly enjoyed himself the afternoon before: so what reason had he to revolt with such loathing at the prospect of an endless vista of such entertainments?

If he could have gone off then and there and settled the matter finally and conclusively it would not have been nearly so bad. It is suspense that is the most trying thing in life; though he fold himself again and again that there was not the slightest uncertainty in this case, or hope — which surely ought to have been

fear — that perhaps, after all, Doris might say "No" to his suit. She must have plenty of other admirers far and away more eligible than himself. That Ralph Shirley, for instance, seemed very acceptable to her, and was, she told him, of a good old Dorset family, and heir, moreover, to a baronetcy. He was a good-looking fellow, too — in that style! — for what man can admit the good points of a rival without some modification, even if, in his heart of hearts, he wishes that rival success?

He wished he could recall accurately what he had said to Doris, or remember the slightest discouragement in her manner; but the more he thought of what had passed the less accurate was his impression of it, and if he had been put into the witness-box that morning I am afraid he would have perjured himself freely.

Mrs. Sims did not know what to make of him that day, he was so captious and fidgety. She was not surprised at his being so over his breakfast, for the kidneys were enough to upset any one's stomach, which she reckoned, and perhaps truly, closely corresponds with the temper; though it was his own fault for being so late and not letting her know beforehand that break-

fast would not be wanted till an hour later than usual.

"But that's just a man all over! The more it's his own fault the vittals is spoiled the more angry he is, and anxious to put the blame on other folks. But there! men's queer creatures to deal with; but they can't help it, poor things, as is made so!"

But even with due allowance for this unfortunate make in man, Mrs. Sims felt that the remarks Oliver made about his lunch "were more than a Christian woman as were always reckoned a good cook could put up with, as had tried to do her duty honest and give satisfaction."

And then for Mr. Oliver to cut her expression of justly injured feelings short with an imperative "There! that will do!" and proceed to shut the door "in her very face," she said — though as a matter of fact she was more than half-way down the passage.

But before he went out Oliver came to make peace with his old nurse, putting his head in at the door of that immaculate kitchen where Mrs. Sims sat with one of his socks drawn over her hand in process of darning and an austere expression on her face. Oliver had a deprecating look on his, reminding Mrs. Sims, though she pretended to be unaware of his presence, of old days when he had had one of his tantrums and had come to coax her to make it up, a process that generally ended in cake for tea.

"Biddy," he said—it was the old name he used to call her in his childish days, which used to unlock tightly compressed lips, and deeply offended hearts, and impregnable jam-cupboards—"Biddy, I think I want a dose. My liver must be out of order or I never could have been so cross. But we have generally hit it off very well together, have n't we? We've been pretty comfortable in the little flat; don't you think so?"

If Mrs. Sims had been a grammarian she might have noticed that the comfort of their tête-à-tête life in the flat was being mentioned in the past tense; but she only took it as an apology for the insult offered to her curry, and received it graciously, for her, with a little snort and a toss of the head, and then with a sudden onslaught with a clothes-brush on his coat, which he thought, with some justice, was already guiltless of a speck of dust.

He had, however, to submit to a brushing, perhaps being not unwilling to meet any trifling delay; and he went off at last with a warm feeling for the old woman, and a wonder what the future might have in store for her, and whether she would fit into any hole or corner of the house in Eldon Crescent among the smart, up-to-date maids in jaunty caps and frilled aprons and intricately dressed hair.

Oliver felt heart's misgivings as to how Mrs. Sims's temper would stand the showy appearance and, no doubt, scamping work of those elegant creatures; or if Doris, beaming as she had been with the old servant, and ingenious, if not always accurate, in her pleasing reminiscences, would care to introduce such an uncertain temper and plain-speaking tongue into her domestic arrangements.

Poor old Sims! it was as difficult to fit her into the house in Eldon Crescent as it had been to get his bookcase into the flat when he arrived. And, by the way, where would that find a resting-place? There was a rather dreary little room on the basement that was called the breakfast-room, on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle, as it was the last room in the house where any

one thought of breakfasting. Doris had once taken him there to show him some pictures that were stowed away. It had rather a mouldy smell, with a spice of blacking from the knife-house close by, but Doris had expatiated on its capabilities and how nice it might be made, and Oliver now mentally measured the length of the wall and wondered if his bookcase could be adapted to its dimensions.

You often hear marriage called a leap in the dark, but before Oliver the prospect was spread out with painful distinctness, photographed from the most unattractive point of view. "Look before you leap" is very good counsel, but there are a good many bold and successful leaps that would never have been made at all if the acrobat had paused to review the possibilities.

"I beg your pardon."

He had been unconsciously following a lady along the street in which Parley Mansions stand, and so wrapt up was he in the contemplation of married life in relation to the disposal of those two impedimenta, Mrs. Sims and the bookcase, that he did not the least observe who it was, or notice that she glanced back once or twice and hesitated as if she would have stopped, and went

on at such a slow pace that, by the time he reached the corner, he had overtaken and would have passed her without recognition if she had not spoken.

"I beg your pardon."

It was Mrs. Frampton. "You are in a hurry," she said, "so I will not detain you, only——"

"Not at all—not at all!" he assured her.
"Can I do anything for you?"

There was an anxious expression in her face, which still looked very young and girlish.

"I was going to ask——" she said hesitatingly. "You have been so kind to the children—they are always talking of you—and——" "Well?"

It was evidently an immense effort to her to speak; the pretty lips quivered, and the eyes, that reminded him somehow of Gay's, though they were so dark, had that terrified courage in them which one sees in a timid creature brought to bay.

"Do is not very well to-day. I don't like leaving her, but I must, and I thought if you would be so very kind as to go in for a few minutes and see the children. She was crying when I came away, and she is such a brave

little heart; it is not a bit like her when she's well."

"I'm very sorry," Oliver said—and his words came out so stiff and formal that he felt as if he were giving her a slap in the face, so snubbing did his answer sound in response to the little display of confidence that was plainly so great an effort to her—"I'm very sorry but I have an engagement this afternoon."

He was not surprised that the old look of defiance came back into her eyes, and that she drew up her head, that was so prettily set on her slight shoulders, with a little air of hauteur.

"I am sorry," she said, "to have detained you. Pray excuse me. Good-afternoon;" and passed on while Oliver was trying to find words to say how sorry he was that Do was not well, and to ask what was the matter, and whether he might come in another day.

She walked on with a brisk, decided step that forbade all idea of continuing the conversation as they went, as they might have done, both being bound in the same direction; and she was round the corner and out of sight before an idea struck him which caused him to try and overtake her.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Frampton."

She turned with a little surprise and the old look of defiance in her face, though he fancied there was a drop glistening on her long lashes that looked suspiciously like a tear.

"It has just occurred to my mind that if your little girl is not well my old housekeeper would be very pleased to go in and see her, if you will allow her. She took a great fancy to the children the other day."

"I should be sorry to trouble her."

"It would be no trouble. She is fond of children, and is dull up there by herself."

She was evidently hesitating, but she shook her head. "Thank you very much, but I have not time to go back and ask her. I am late for my appointment as it is."

So also was Oliver, but he hastened to assure her that he could easily go back and tell Mrs. Sims. "But how is she to get in?"

Mrs. Frampton gave him her latchkey.

"I am afraid I am giving you a great deal of trouble, but if you would ask your housekeeper to give the key to the porter when she comes out it will be all right. Thank you so very much!"

And then she was gone, and Oliver hurried back to despatch Mrs. Sims to the children. But when he was half-way up the stairs he suddenly altered his mind, and turned and went down again, and making his way to the nearest telegraph-office, sent the following message:

"MISS MOSTYN, Eldon Crescent. — Unavoidably detained. Deeply regret. May I come tomorrow? — OLIVER BRUCE."

"I wonder," he said as he retraced his steps to Parley Mansions, "if I am a cur?"

Certainly if he was a cur he was a very cheerful one, with an untold weight suddenly lifted off his spirits.

CHAPTER XII

A FACE AND A GARDEN

Her angel's face, As the great eye of heaven, shyned bright, And made a sunshine in the shady place.

No daintie flower or herbe that growes on ground, No arborett with painted blossoms drest, And smelling sweete, but there it might be found. — Spenser.

HAT afternoon might have given Oliver Bruce a good opportunity for satisfying his curiosity about his somewhat mysterious neighbour, if he had not felt that it would be mean to take advantage of an occasion when his defiant young opponent had been compelled for once to lower her guard and give him a chance to pierce her strictly kept privacy, so he felt in honour bound to observe as little as possible and to ask no questions of the children.

But a less naturally observant eye than Oliver's could hardly have failed to notice some of his surroundings during a visit of three hours (for that was the length of his first call at No. 9); and as the flat was an exact counterpart of his own—only, of course, with all the rooms in reverse order—he could hardly help making comparison between one and the other, and in doing so notice more than he otherwise would.

Against the wall corresponding to that on which his engraving of Murillo's Madonna hung, the best light in both rooms, was a water-colour drawing of a woman's head that at first glance Oliver thought was that of Mrs. Frampton. But a second look showed that it was a fairer, gentler, sweeter face, with hair more the colour of Gay's, ruddy and rich, piled in a mass on the small head; and the great eyes were gray, and smiled without a shade of the defiance that shone in Mrs. Frampton's, though he had seen those soften and grow sympathetic under the influence of music. Even allowing for the effects of trouble and anxiety, Mrs. Frampton could never have had the calm brightness of that radiant face, whose smile seemed to make sunshine in the room, and drew Oliver's eyes back to the picture again and again as he talked to the children.

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"That's Judy," Gay said, following the direction of Oliver's eyes; "not Punch and Judy, you know,"—with a severe look at Do, as if such mistakes had occurred and required to be nipped in the bud.

"Not Punch and Judy," reiterated Do in a very languid little voice. "Dat's only Judy without Punch."

She was evidently not at all well or up to holding her own against Gay, but listless and feverish and heavy-eved, and inclined to take small rubs and vexations to heart more than was generally her wont; so Oliver adroitly changed the subject to another picture that hung opposite. It was the picture of an oldfashioned, rambling house, looking very homelike and pleasant, among big, shady trees that threw broad, peaceful shadows across the lawn. It was just the garden into which Oliver would have liked to transport the children that oppressive afternoon. The room was hot and stuffy with the window shut and the June sun beating in, and it was strewed about with the children's toys, and did not show the same trim tidiness or exquisite cleanness that Oliver sometimes thought was carried almost to excess in

his own quarters under Mrs. Sims's strenuous battle with London smoke and dirt.

It would have been delightful, Oliver thought, to take the children out of that open French window depicted in the drawing, on to that smooth, springy old turf (which, no doubt, was mainly moss), and establish them under that big horse-chestnut tree - too large, I suppose, landscape-gardeners would have declared, for the garden, but spreading out great cool green fans and offering liberal hospitality of shade. It was a spring picture, and the chestnut had lighted up its white tapers, and the spruce-fir beyond had tricked out its solemn evergreen branches with gay little tassels of light-green and frivolous pink fir-cones. Above the bowwindow, out of which Oliver fancied carrying little, querulous Do, was a bridal wreath of white clematis, so deftly painted that Oliver could almost smell the delicate fragrance and hear the bees buzzing round it; and he would have been ready to wager that nightingales frequented that shrubbery into which the mossy path to the left led away.

[&]quot;That's home," said little Gay.

[&]quot;Your home?"



'Come and help me to get tea,' said Oliver.



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" Yes."

"It must be a very nice home."

"Yes; Maisie says it's the nicest home in the world."

"Why ——" Oliver was going to ask, "Why don't you live there?" but checked himself in time, and substituted, "Why don't you have the window open?"

"Maisie don't like it. She thinks we shall fall out."

"She won't mind if I open it."

Gay felt a little doubtful, but Oliver spoke so decidedly that he did not object further; and Do proceeded to give a practical illustration of Maisie's wisdom in forbidding open windows, by going out on the balcony and preparing to climb the railings to obtain a better view of an engaging parrot in a neighbouring flat, and had to be summarily withdrawn from such dangerous adventure by a firm grasp on short petticoats behind.

"Come and help me get tea," said Oliver.

It was evident that Do could not be well or she would never have allowed Gay to show Oliver the way into the kitchen while she lay on the sofa; and she had fallen into a little, flushed, uneasy sleep when they returned.

The kitchen showed still more than the sitting-room that Mrs. Sims was not the presiding genius there, and Oliver felt quite glad that she could not see the saucepans as he looked about for something to warm the milk in; and he was still more glad that she could not see his very clumsy attempts at doing it when a suitable saucepan had been found.

The children's milk was put on the kitchen table, and a plate of bread-and-butter carefully covered over, and Gay told him that, when they heard the clock in Maisie's bedroom strike five times, they were to come in and fetch it.

There was a little gas-stove for boiling the kettle, and over this Oliver, with Gay's assistance, warmed the milk, both of them getting very hot and dirty in the process.

Mrs. Bruce used to say sometimes that Oliver was as good as a daughter, and certainly there was a touch of the woman in him which is quite compatible with manliness and strength, though adverse critics might have added the adjective "old" to the "woman;" and these, perhaps, might have derided his muddling, but on the

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whole successful, attempts at the duties of a nursemaid.

A good deal of Gay's information was unintelligible to Oliver, though it was eked out with much gesticulation, and impressed upon him with pommelling of small fists when he was unable to understand, or sometimes shouted into his ear, dragged down to listen or arrived at by climbing; for such denseness of intelligence must be owing to deafness, diagnosed this young practitioner.

Other facts were whispered into his ear as being profound secrets; and so they were likely to remain, for such tickling ensued from the red lips breathing into his ear, and Gay was so amused at the involuntary wriggle that Oliver could not in consequence resist, that a splutter of laughter ended the important communication, whatever it might have been.

I think that it was while boiling the kettle that they settled on "Chum" as a suitable name for Oliver, as Gay found a difficulty about the form of address for him; but he stipulated that Do should not be allowed to use it, as "You and me is chums, and she's only a little girl." Gay subsequently added an "s" and made

it "Chums," and "Chums" it remained henceforth.

Do was in no state to contest the point, though Gay rather aggressively flourished his special, privileged name for Oliver to attract her envious notice. She did not make much of a tea when she woke, but liked to sit on Oliver's knee and lean a very tumbled curly head against his shoulder, and finger his watchchain with hot, restless little hands.

They were just opposite the picture of "home," and Gay pointed out where the poppies grew in the garden, and where an appletree, just now covered with a glory of pink and white blossom, looked over the laurel hedge.

"It's not always like that," Gay explained to the ignorant adult mind. "What do you think it has on it sometimes?"

"What?" inquired Oliver, with intense interest.

"Why, great big rosy-cheeked apples — so sweet! It's not a very tall tree, so that you don't want a stick to knock them down; and sometimes they fall off themselves, and you pick them up and eat them."

"How nice!" said Oliver.

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"And that's the way you go to the cocks and hens. They lay new-laid eggs for breakfast. And there's a great big pig in a sty."

"Ugh! ugh!" from Do, in illustration of that animal's form of speech.

"For rashers?" Oliver suggested; but Gay was doubtful if this convenience were attached to the home farmyard.

"There's Sweetlips out there too."

"Is that another pig?" inquired Oliver, with the dense stupidity of the adult.

"No-o-o-o!" indignantly from both children. "That's the cow. And there's Pretty Maid too. Pigs don't never have nice names like that. They puts their noses into their food and bubbles."

"Ah!" said Oliver, "then they don't deserve any names at all."

Gay offered to show Oliver how the pigs eat, as he still had some milk in his cup, but Oliver thought he could imagine the process, and he would rather see little boys eat, and, to change the subject, asked if they fed the cocks and hens.

"No; but Maisie did, and the pigeons too; and one of them used to fly on her shoulder."

- "Why did n't you feed them?"
- "I've never been there."
- "Never been home?"
- "No. Maisie says we'll go some day, perhaps."
 - "When we die," interpolated Do.
- "No," fretfully from Gay. "You're a stupid little girl; that's heaven."
- "I's not a stupid little girl. Maisie told me so."
 - "How is it you know all about it?"
- "Maisie tells us all about it every day. We sits just where you're sitting Do and me and Maisie and she begins, and we choose which way we will go. Sometimes we comes out of the drawing-room window, and goes all about the garden and picks flowers; and sometimes out of the front door and round to the stable-yard, and then we takes a bit of sugar for Cock Robin that's the pony, you know, not the one in the book that was shot. And sometimes we goes round by the kitchen-garden to the orchard and the cocks and hens; and sometimes it's wet and we stop indoors. Do likes it best in the kitchen; there's such a big fire, and all sorts of nice things in the store cupboard and the

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dairy. Maisie and Judy lived there when they was little like Do and me."

"Who lives there now?"

"Judy lives there, and — I think — grandfather, but Maisie never talks of him."

Oliver told them about his "home," in which the children took rather a condescending interest, as it was evidently—and perhaps Oliver rather favoured this impression—a very inferior place to the home about which Maisie told them in the twilight, with the two children nestling up against her and drinking in all the details which loving memory made so sweet; though Oliver fancied that in the narrator's eyes might have gathered those tears from the depth of some divine despair, that rise in the heart

"In looking on the happy autumn fields, And thinking of the days that are no more."

With all his honourable intentions of leaving Maisie's secrets inviolate, and of hearing and seeing nothing that perhaps she might wish to conceal, a hundred little touches and words said or left unsaid by the children drew before his mind's eye the picture of two girls, happy and

innocent and peaceful, in a sweet country home, and then of some catastrophe that had driven one of the two out of Eden into a world of thorns and briers. Perhaps in that moss under the chestnut-tree was curled the serpent that had caused the trouble; perhaps at the end of that shady path stood the angel with the sword to bar the way of return.

"Anyhow," he said, with a little laugh, trying to withdraw his thoughts from the tempting exercise of fitting in imaginary details to this picture of Paradise Lost, "she seems to have brought two stray cherubim along with her."

CHAPTER XIII

NOT AT HOME

He who will not when he may, When he will he shall have nay. — Burton.

DO not think that a disagreeable thing ever improves or becomes less distasteful by being put off. You had better gulp down your medicine without looking at it; it is twice as nasty after ten minutes' contemplation. The only possible excuse for procrastination in doing unpleasant things is that on the morrow it may not be necessary to do them at all, but this is such a very off chance that it is hardly worth taking into consideration. Anyhow, Oliver's pill was still in prospect the next morning, and you may be sure it did not appear any smaller or more brightly gilded than it had been the day before, when, if we recall rightly his feelings at the beginning of Chapter XI., it was not a matter of a pill, but of bread-andbutter, at which he groaned in bed.

There was no answer from Doris to his telegram, but silence no doubt gave consent, and he would find her that afternoon awaiting him in the pretty drawing-room in Eldon Crescent.

He told Mrs. Sims about his afternoon in the opposite flat as she cleared away his breakfast-things, and suggested that she should go across to No. 9 and inquire how Do was to-day; and though she grumbled out something about being too busy to go running after other people's business, as no doubt a powder was what the child wanted, or a dose of brimstone and treacle, "as was reckoned a fine thing when she was a gal," he saw her hand go involuntarily to the string of her apron, an action which he knew from experience meant that another yet more spotless was to take its place before she appeared in public. Shortly afterwards he heard the front door close.

It opened again, however, speedily, and was shut after her with an emphasis that meant temper; and he found on inquiry that the opposite door had been answered by the charwoman, Mrs. Sims's special abomination, "with a smear right across her face, and a apron as might have cleaned the grate, and as impident

as you please. 'How de do, Mrs. Sims?' says she"—with a futile attempt to imitate the Cockney vernacular—"'and how d'you find yourself?' as if we was the dearest friends, as ain't used to consort with sluts!"

"Oh, well!" said Oliver, "but how was the child?"

"Well, there, Mr. Oliver! I was so flustered I hardly knew what she said, but there can't be much the matter, as the piano was going at a fine rate. My goodness! such a noise! It's an uncommon good thing as we don't hear it over here; the lady down below is bad enough. Singing, indeed! I calls it 'owling. It's a pity she don't put on a apron and take a duster. I'll warrant there's plenty to do in No. 9."

Which Oliver could not gainsay.

"Them little dots told me when they was here that day as they did use to have a nurse, but she was ill and had to go away; and now, they says, as serious as anything — now they 're so big they don't want one. Just to hear them babies! They has that slut of a charwoman every morning, making things dirtier than she finds them; and it's my belief, Mr. Oliver, that

that mother of theirs goes out night after night play-acting or singing or something, and leaves them two precious babies shut up in that flat without a soul to look after them, as might have a fit, or set theirselves on fire, or goodness knows what!"

Oliver shook his head dubiously as if such a thing were unlikely, if not impossible, guiltily conscious that her suspicions were only too well founded, and that he himself had been witness of a catastrophe which had happened in her absence, and which, being neither a fit nor fire, would probably come under the head of "Goodness knows what."

"Their father's dead, pretty lambs! and they did n't say nothing about him, as must have been dead some time, seeing as their ma have lef' off her weeds." (Mrs. Sims herself still bristled in crape on state occasions.) "She ain't much more than a bit of a gal herself. It's bad for any one to be lef' like that, as I knows myself;" and Mrs. Sims gave a heavy sigh, though she had not experienced widowhood as a bit of a girl.

There was a notable increase of mildness in the way in which Mrs. Sims spoke of their next-door neighbours — whether owing to the liking she had taken to the children, or out of opposition to a sneering remark from the porter, it would be hard to say — and Oliver was careful not to take up the cudgels on their behalf, knowing by experience that this was the surest way to set her against them.

Indeed, he let fall one or two little disparaging observations, which drew from Mrs. Sims moral and reproving axioms against expecting to find old heads on young shoulders, and "If folks does their best they can't do more; and, anyhows, the children is quite wrop' up in their ma, as shows pretty plain as she ain't nasty to 'em."

And as this was quite the frame of mind in Mrs. Sims that Oliver was anxious to cultivate, he submitted to being treated as an ill-natured fault-finder who could not make allowance for youth and inexperience. It was curious how much he thought of the two children and of the young, anxious-looking, defiant mother, whose slim, girlish hand seemed to be against every man, and who evidently expected every man's hand to be against her. They took his thoughts away from his own affairs, which were at such

a critical juncture, and almost made him forget that he was going to put his fate to the touch to win or lose it all.

That stupid postponement from yesterday had by no means improved his position, and he could not imagine now why he had not gone to Eldon Crescent, or what reason he could possibly give for not keeping his engagement. He lectured himself pretty soundly for his pusillanimity, and called himself all the names that men are so ready to call themselves and so angry when any one else ventures to do so.

He sat down and tried to consider the matter coolly, and then found that he had brought Gay's wooden monkey away with him to mend a dislocated limb; and he got so absorbed in this surgical operation, that he jumped to his feet in dismay at hearing the clock strike four, by which time he had meant to be well on his way.

He hurried into another coat and down the stairs and into a hansom. It was all the better not to have much time for consideration, and, whatever happened, he would not be late to-day.

He pulled up at a flower-shop and bought lavishly of Maréchal Niel roses and maidenhair, and then regretted his purchase and had half a mind to leave it in the cab, so aggressively bridal did it look,

Well, well! coming events cast their shadows before, and sometimes the shadow cast by a wedding, in spite of its white and silver, is very dark. But perhaps it is as well to get used to such things, and it might be wholesome for an intending bridegroom to carry a few *confetti* in his pocket, or a white satin shoe attached to his coat-tails.

Here they were at Eldon Crescent! He wished now that he had walked. There was something absurd, and suggestive of an ardour he did not feel, in dashing up to the door in a hansom and flinging open the doors and jumping out.

He thought there was a knowing look in the cabman's face, and a tendency to survey him through the little trap-door with a benignant and "Bless you, my children" expression of countenance, and to linger after Oliver had overpaid him, and watch out of the corner of his eye as Oliver, with his flowers, mounted the steps of the house.

It was a relief to his mind when the hansom

disappeared round the corner, which it had time to do leisurely, for there was a delay in answering the door — unusual, it seemed to Oliver, though it was not exactly the impatience of a lover that made him notice it.

He came across that same cabman a few minutes later waiting round the corner having a chat with a waterman, and the man hailed him with a friendly look of recognition.

Miss Mostyn was not at home. The smart parlour-maid who opened the door was used to announce the fact unblushingly, entirely irrespective of its truth. I wonder, by the way, if a lie is any the less a lie because it is so generally adopted and deceives no one? But perhaps there was a special zest to the maid in telling the untruth to-day, for no doubt the circumstances had been fully discussed in the servants' hall, and the general consensus of opinion was that it served him right. And Oliver gave himself away so, for he only asked if Miss Mostyn was at home as a mere matter of form, and was halfway through the door before the words were out of the girl's mouth, and he could not conceal his astonishment

I am not sure that his mouth did not drop a

little open. Parker told the other servants that he stood and stared like a stuck pig; though that, I think, was an exaggeration.

He fumbled after his card-case and dropped his umbrella, and was very nearly carrying the flowers away with him, but happily bethought himself in time.

"Will you give these to Miss Mostyn with my kind regards, and say I am sorry to have missed her?"

And then he walked down the steps with as much dignity as he could command, but with an indefinable feeling as if he had been kicked, a sensation which is incompatible with much dignity; and then, as I said, he turned the corner and caught the cabman's sympathetic eye, and scowled back at him.

"Hullo, Bruce!" It was the man they had met at Lady Ventnor's, and to whom Doris had introduced him, and whom he had thought a pleasant fellow. "Is n't it a ripping day? Been to the Crescent — eh? That 's where I'm bound for, and I'm afraid I'm a bit late. Ta-ta!"

And he went briskly off before Oliver had time to say that he would not find Miss Mostyn at home; which, perhaps, was as well, for on consideration Oliver did not feel sure that Ralph Shirley might not find her at home, and it would only reveal the fact that he himself had been refused admittance.

He went for a turn in Kensington Gardens, and tried to sort his feelings, which were oddly mixed. There was certainly a little soreness perceptible, though half-an-hour ago he would have hailed any excuse for getting out of what seemed to him inevitable. Perhaps it was owing to the consciousness that he deserved a snub for his cavalier treatment of Doris Mostyn. And then, too, in that contrary way in which Fancy torments the sensitive mind, that mischievous artist painted her to Oliver's mind's eye in pleasanter colours than it had done certainly for the last two days, depicting little graceful traits about the girl, pretty refined manners, cultivated soft tone of voice, and dainty dress, and throwing over the whole the warm light of his mother's affectionate liking, which might have glorified a much less attractive girl. Some of the charm that had so carried him away two days ago returned to him now, with a sort of impatient regret and a growing impression that he had not only behaved like a cur but like a fool.

Those details of married life, which had seemed so revolting to him that morning, had lost many of their disturbing attributes, and he even thought with equanimity of that small room on the basement, where his bookcase could really stand quite comfortably.

When he had reached this point in his reflections, he determined to go home and write to Doris and simply explain what had prevented him coming yesterday, and ask her to forgive him, etc.

He thought a good deal of that *et cetera*, and was just putting it into a very poetical sentence when he became aware of Ralph Shirley coming along with that easy, long stride of his that took him so quickly over the ground.

Oliver did not particularly wish to meet him again, for he was coming from the direction of Eldon Crescent, and, while Oliver had been sitting in the Gardens, enough time had elapsed to allow of a pretty long call having been paid if he had found Doris at home; so Oliver turned into a side-path, and Ralph Shirley passed without recognising him. But Oliver went on his way after seeing him with another little prick of irritation with asses in general and himself

in particular, for Shirley had, as a button-hole, a Maréchal Niel rosebud and a bit of maiden-hair fern, which Oliver had not noticed when he met him before; and though, of course, there are thousands of such roses in London in June, still he had a vexatious feeling of recognition as being one of the flowers he had left for Doris.

CHAPTER XIV

A SMALL GUEST

O dearest, dearest boy! my heart For better lore would seldom yearn, Could I but teach the hundredth part Of what from thee I learn. — WORDSWORTH.

EOPLE who live in top-flats ought to be very good-tempered, for though they may not mind the stairs in the ordinary course of events, a flight of a hundred and fifty steps added on after a disappointment or a humiliation or a vexation is a very perceptible additional trial to human endurance, and should be taken into account before you select your eyrie.

I think it was Ellesmere in *Friends in Council* who wondered that men were so good-tempered when they were exposed to the daily irritation of shaving, and I suppose that with women hair-dressing has the same chastening or exasperating effect. Indeed, if you come to think of all the unnecessary complications of dressing, you

may envy the poor Indian with untutored mind who puts on all (if any) of his garments with one fell swoop, without buttons or tapes or studs or hooks and eyes.

So Oliver Bruce added on a little additional annoyance with each step that he took upstairs, and when he had reached his door, hunted in all his pockets for his latchkey, and ultimately found it in its usual nook, from which it emerged with a look of injured innocence, as much as to say, "What's all this fuss about when I was here all the time?"

There are certainly times in life when inanimate objects are possessed with mischievous elves, if not worse.

He had prolonged his way home by a détour to an old book-shop, and to a reference library to look up some point in his (of late) greatly neglected work, so that it was half-past seven, his usual dinner-time, when he reached home, and, turning into his little dining-room, threw himself into an arm-chair with a general feeling that the world was out of joint, and that it would be a relief to kick somebody.

The table was laid for dinner, and it was only after contemplating the array of spoons

and forks and glasses sullenly for some minutes that he became aware that there was something unusual in its arrangement.

Yes, by Jove! the table was laid for two. Who on earth? And then it appeared that the expected guest, whoever it might be, did not require the usual complement of knives and forks, wine-glasses and tumbler, but was merely provided with a spoon and fork, and a mug that had been Oliver's at a very early age, and which was adorned with the legend, "Ba, ba! black sheep," and a pink lamb, the colour of which had struck Oliver as unnatural and particularly inappropriate before he was out of pinafores.

And, while he was pondering this manifestation, a mysterious movement in the tablecloth became apparent — a movement he might have noticed before if he had not been so engrossed with his own megrims — as also the sound of breathing, which almost developed into a chuckle when Oliver said, "By Jove!"

And then Oliver observed through the open door Mrs. Sims looking round the corner of the kitchen passage, with some implement of dishing-up in her hand, showing at what a crucial point in the dinner she had arrived, and yet that she could not resist a peep at the scene that was being enacted in the dining-room.

"Hullo!" said Oliver. "What's up now?" and lifting the cloth, discovered Gay, in a very clean pinafore and curly hair, beaming with delight.

"Please, Chums," said Gay, scrambling out on hands and knees, "I 've come to stay with 'oo."

"You see, Master Oliver," Mrs. Sims explained, with a baster in her hand, and a distinct smell of something burning in the kitchen, which at another time would have prevented her from attending to the most important matters in life—"you see, I step over the way this afternoon to see how the baby was, and found their poor ma in a rare taking. The doctor had jes' bin, and————Oh, it ain't nothing to signify!" Mrs. Sims went on quickly, for Gay's big blue eyes were fixed upon her; "jes' a little something in the throat. She'll be all right, and playing about same as ever, if we're a good boy and don't cry, and make ourselves happy."

Mrs. Sims had begun explaining circumstances to Oliver, but ended under the magnetic influence of Gay's eyes by addressing herself to

him; and if Oliver had not felt so sorry at the news she was trying to convey to him, he would have been amused at the doleful pantomime she kept up whenever Gay's attention was distracted from her face, shaking her head and pointing to her throat with an expression meant to convey the deepest concern and anxiety.

"Is n't she funny?" Gay confided to Oliver when they were alone. "She do make such faces, like that gutta-percha face that Maisie has when you squeezes it up altogether."

But now Oliver said, "All right; and so you've come to stop with me till Do gets well again?"

Mrs. Sims gave a dolorous shake of the head, quickly changed into a ghastly attempt at cheerfulness when Gay's eyes returned to their fascinated study of her face.

"Well," said Oliver, "all right, old chap; I'll wash my hands and we'll have some dinner—if it's ready"—with a sniff that sent Mrs. Sims flying to the kitchen to rescue whatever it was that was making its peril evident to one of the senses.

"Maisic said you was very kind, and I ——"
There was a little tremulousness in Gay's voice,

and a tendency to swallow and to blink something bright away from long lashes, which made it necessary to provide immediate change of thought, so Oliver invited him to come and assist at the hand-washing; and, by the time the clean pinafore was wetted all down the front, Gay had recovered his spirits, and described to Oliver what a funny old man the doctor was who came to see Do that afternoon.

"He was n't as tall as Maisie, and he had a bald head, quite shiny. It must be nice to have a bald head," reflected Gay, who was using Oliver's brushes with disastrous effect on hair that Mrs. Sims had carefully arranged into a cockatoo curl, a style of hairdressing which in old days she had attempted in vain on Oliver's obstinately straight locks,

"Why is it nice to have a bald head?" asked Oliver, who had had searchings of heart over a spot on his own crown where he fancied the hair was not quite so abundant as of yore.

"There would be no tangling," said Gay, "and you could have it washed same time as your face. Do you have your head washed on Saturday, Chums? Me and Do don't like Saturdays, but Maisie tells us stories all the time, and she don't pull more than she can help, Maisie don't; and if she do, I don't never cry out now I'm a big boy."

When, as often happened, the talk came round to Maisie there was apt to be a minor note introduced into the gay young voice, and a wistful look into the clear eyes, and a quiver into the rosy mouth; so that Oliver had to be very much on the alert to change the subject, in case that catastrophe should ensue which Gay declared never did with big boys.

"We're bound to have a hullabaloo at bedtime," Oliver told himself when he had skilfully avoided some shoal or quicksand in their conversation; but the difficulty was happily overcome by the sudden descent of sleep as Gay sat on Oliver's knee in the twilight by the window after dinner.

Oliver's pipe had been a great subject of interest, and as "Maisie don't never smoke," it did not bring upsetting memories; and Gay had rummaged out a little cigarette-holder which did excellently as a pipe for him, with much puffing and blowing out of cheeks. And then they watched a star come out over the opposite house, and a cat creep along the tiles of a lower roof

to the left; and then Oliver felt the curly head press against his shoulder, and the cigaretteholder fell to the floor, and Gay was asleep.

Mrs. Sims had been more than once to look into the room, with the particular little warning clear-up in her throat which Oliver remembered so well in his childhood; and perhaps Gay divined intuitively what it meant, for each time his hand tightened on Oliver's coat and he began talking very fast.

Perhaps Mrs. Sims, too, dreaded the hullabaloo which Oliver reckoned on at bedtime, for each time she retreated without making an allusion to the lateness of the hour or quoting any of the cut-and-dried axioms about "Early to bed" or "All the ducks and fowls, you know."

"She would n't have treated me with such leniency," Oliver thought; "and the *mater*, too, used to be hounded off to bed, willy-nilly, when bedtime as prescribed by the laws of the Medes and Persians arrived."

Oliver's pipe had gone out, and he would not stir to refill it for fear of waking the small sleeper; though he had had one experience before of the depth of young slumbers, and need not have sat in that cramped position, hardly drawing his breath for fear of disturbing the child.

When Mrs. Sims came in again she found the two sitting in the dark, and Oliver half-asleep too.

"And now perhaps you'll tell me what it all means? If you're going to invite all the brats in the Mansions, we may as well open a foundling hospital at once."

Mrs. Sims knew Oliver too well to take any notice of this pretended indignation; and besides, the edge of it was taken off by his having the "brat" in his arms.

"Well, you see, Master Oliver, it was n't in a 'uman heart to refuse. It ain't never my way to interfere in other folk's business. I've always kep' myself to myself. I don't want any one messing round when I'm in a bit of trouble, and so I don't go for to put my finger in other folk's pies. Why, when my Mark were a-dying——"

Oliver knew of old that it was necessary to go through a prologue of Mrs. Sims's varied experiences, generally entirely irrelevant to the subject in hand, before arriving at the point of the matter; and he also knew that any interruptions or attempts at short-cuts only prolonged the course of events, so he submitted patiently.

I will, however, spare the reader, and take up the parable after her return from excursions into extraneous matters:

"You see, Master Oliver, I step in this afternoon when I knew that dirty slut of a charwoman had gone. I see the doctor come in jes' after you started, and as I happened to be polishing the door-handle, I see him go; and he had n't been gone ten minutes before that Mrs. Jones come out all of a fuss, and tying her bonnet-strings as she come, and saying something about not stopping there to catch all sorts of nasty complaints, and as she should jes' go and tell Mr. Rogers at the office, and I'd better mind what I was after. I pretended not to hear what she was talking of, being busylike over my brass; but as soon as she'd gone downstairs, slopping along with her shoes down at heel, and such holes in her stockings as you never did see, I jes' step across and rung the bell. Mrs. Maisie come to the door — There! I can't lay my tongue to her name, but it's Maisie as the children call her, so that 'll do as well as another. She was as white as my apron

and all of a tremble, but she only opened the door a crack and she says, 'We've got diphtheria here,' says she, 'so you'd best not come in. Thank you for calling, all the same.' She was jes' going to close the door when I put my foot in. 'Have both the children got it?' I says. 'Not yet,' she says, and she put both hands to her throat as if the words kinder strangled her — 'not yet — not Gay yet.' So I says, 'If you'll excuse the liberty, ma'am, I'll jes' step in and set down, being on in years and given to swelled legs if I stands about much.' 'Ain't you afraid?' says she. 'Stuff-a-rubbish!' says I. I did n't mean to be rude, Master Oliver, as you knows nothing is farther from my habits, but she seemed quite upset-like, and she turned right round and stood with her back to me, shaking like a haspen, while I went in and set down in the kitchen. Not as I could set long, for that woman had left it all in a caddle, and I could n't keep my hands off tidying up a bit. And presently she come in, and thanked me very pretty and asks me not to trouble. 'It's little Do,' she says, 'as is ill. The doctor don't think she's very bad, but he says as Gay may take it.' 'You did oughter

send him away,' I says; and she says, 'That's jes' what the doctor says, but I've nowhere to send him. I've got him in the farthest room, and I'm putting up a carbolic sheet, but he can't be alone always, and I must be with Do.' 'Let me and Master Oliver have him,' says I; and she would n't hear of it at first, and that it was giving you a lot of trouble, and that gentlemen did n't like being bothered with children. But the end of it was, she gave in, and I brought him away. He did n't quite like coming, but she told him he must be a good boy and do just as he was told, and not cry, and it's wonderful how the child minds what she says. 'If he's not well,' she says, looking the child over sorter hungry-like, as if she could have eaten him, she were that fond—'if he's not well. you'll be sure and let me know, and bring him back. You've had to do with children,' she says, 'and you'll know directly if there's anything wrong.' There ain't nothing wrong at present," Mrs. Sims said, surveying the sleeping child in Oliver's arms with the eye of a connoisseur; "and I don't see why there should be, neither. He eat as good a tea as any child need to, bless him! - four slices of bread-andjam — and said his grace as pretty as possible; but he did n't like having it in the kitchen along with me, so I give it him in here, and when I lay the dinner I put a place for him just to please him, though I don't suppose he fancied anything after all that bread-and-jam. Why, you never give him any of that stew, Master Oliver, as did ought to know better at your age, as might have had children of your own by this time. I'd made up a nice little bed for him in my room, but he got a bit upset when I showed it to him."

"Oh, he'd better go into my bed," said Oliver, "and I can sleep on the sofa."

"There!" said Mrs. Sims; "as if I didn't know as you'd say that! As if I should dream of letting you go for to do it! But I've made up his on the sofa, and we'll just pop him into it while he's asleep, and he won't wake till the morning, so we'll have got over the first going to bed, which is such a business with most children."

This having been successfully done, Oliver had still an undisturbed evening before him in which to write that letter to Doris Mostyn, with that poetical *et cetera* in it which he had composed in Kensington Gardens. But when he went to bed, with unnecessary precautions of quietness for fear of waking the sleeper, he suddenly remembered that the letter had not been written.

CHAPTER XV

IN KENSINGTON GARDENS

It's gladness that most wants sharing; It takes two to be glad. — IBSEN.

T is wonderful how easily children accommodate themselves to circumstances, and I believe that Gay was quite at home long before Oliver had grown accustomed to his presence.

Oliver went across before breakfast to inquire how Do was, but had not the presence of mind to force an entrance, as Mrs. Sims had done, under the excuse of being on in years and suffering from swelled legs, so he only had an interview with Maisie through the crack of the door.

[&]quot;Is he well?" she asked breathlessly.

[&]quot; Quite."

[&]quot;Is he good?"

[&]quot;Perfectly."

"Is he ——" It seemed ungracious to ask if he were happy of his host himself, but Oliver answered:

"I really believe he is."

"I don't know how to thank you."

"Then don't, please. There is nothing to thank for. I can assure you that Gay is a great amusement to Mrs. Sims and me. She wants to know, by the way, if she may come in and tidy up for you. She is very wrathful at that charwoman's behaviour. She really is a kind old soul."

"Don't I know that? But ask her, please, not to come. As you are so very, very kind as to keep Gay, I should feel happier about him if we don't come backwards and forwards. That was why I did not come over last night to see if he had gone to bed like a good boy."

"What sort of night did you have?"

"Oh, pretty fair. I don't think she's any worse, and she slept a good deal. If Gay might come and stand at your door for a minute I think it would be rather a comfort, but don't let him run across."

So Oliver went back and fetched Gay, just escaped from the bathroom and Mrs. Sims's

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hands—such a bonny, wholesome little person, with such rosy cheeks and bright eyes, and hair whose irrepressible curliness resisted all Mrs. Sims's efforts to train it into stiff precision.

He stood holding Oliver's hand and blowing kisses across to the narrow opening of the opposite door, where Maisie's face showed white and wistful, with that hungry look on it that had caught Mrs. Sims's notice.

"I'm a good boy, Maisie. I have n't cried once. I'm going to have a whole egg for my breakfast."

Oliver could quite imagine what a refreshment the sight of Gay must be to tired eyes that had been watching anxiously by a small sickbed; and no doubt, in those depressing early hours in the morning, fears for the other child had come to haunt her and to suggest that in Gay too might be lurking the deadly germs of that fell disease—fears which she could not pacify by a look at a rosy sleeping face or the touch of a cool young hand.

It is all very well to say that at cock-crow ghosts that haunt the night retire to their graves, for in those miserable hours of dawn all sorts of grisly creatures come to terrify waking hearts which had been stout and brave through the watches of the night.

Oliver would have been glad to retire and let the two have their say untrammelled by his presence; not, however, that this affected Gay much, who commented freely on "Chums" and his household arrangements, in a manner that might have been painful if the criticism had not been so invariably favourable.

But the small hand in his gave little pulls and jerks that showed that without restraint the short distance between the two doors would soon be crossed, and, unless the door was closed with brutal sharpness, the child would be in the arms that were no doubt longing while they feared to catch him up and strain him against the aching mother's heart.

Moreover, Oliver felt that the child's confiding hold and his friendly, familiar treatment of "Chums" allayed any apprehension that she might have cherished that Gay was an unwelcome guest. There was nothing that Oliver could have said to reassure her on this point so conclusively as Gay rubbing his curly head against Oliver's arm, and with Oliver's assistance climbing up to his shoulder, from which

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elevation he waved his hand to her as the door closed and Mrs. Sims announced that breakfast was ready.

I suppose that in well-regulated establishments children do not entirely absorb the time and attention of the adults of the household, but certainly that day I do not think Oliver Bruce or Mrs. Sims thought of anything but their small guest; though Mrs. Sims was severe on Oliver for spoiling him, being really a little jealous of the preference Gay showed for his society.

She took the child out with her when she went to do her marketing, and, in spite of all her wise theories about the feeding of children, I regret to say that he came back with a very sticky mouth, and a sugar pig in one pocket, and very little appetite left for the midday meal, which was curiously suggestive to Oliver of old days in the nursery, there being an almost barbaric simplicity in the boiled mutton and rice-pudding.

During Gay's absence in the morning there was nothing to prevent Oliver from carrying on his studies undisturbed, or from writing that letter to Doris, the poetic phraseology of which

was, however, getting a bit frayed at the edges by mental repetition, and had a curious tendency to run off into nursery rhymes, which he and Gay had been piecing out during breakfast, Oliver contributing fragments from long-ago memories, and Gay adding newly acquired lore with a royal disregard for rhyme or rhythm.

But when Mrs. Sims's key sounded in the latch, and Gay's curly head and sugar pig appeared at the door, and Mrs. Sims bid him come along with her and not disturb Mr. Oliver as was busy writing his book, Oliver in rather a shamefaced way slipped something under his blotting-paper — something that was neither manuscript nor letter, but an elaborate paper horse, so constructed that it would stand on all-fours and career gaily across the table with the aid of the human breath.

"I won't make no noise," said Gay wistfully. "I'll be awful quiet. Maisie lets me dip her pen into the ink for her, and I don't never make blots, only sometimes. And I do want to see you write your book! It must be awful difficult to make all those wee, tiny, little letters one after another so close!" said Gay, natu-

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rally supposing that authors printed their own works by hand ready for the public, without any tiresome interposition of publishers and printers. "Is there any pictures in it," asked Gay, who had already sampled Oliver's library and found it distinctly uninteresting, "or is it all little black a's and b's like those?"

"Come on, then," said Oliver; and it can be easily imagined how much manuscript or how many important letters were written that morning, with Gay perched at his elbow with lively interest in everything on the writing-table, and presiding over the inkstand with deadly effect on fat fingers and thumbs, and sundry embellishments to pinafore and collar; which caused Mrs. Sims to look severe, till Gay presented her with a blotted page covered with very erratic pot-hooks and hangers, which he had written his very own self "for 'oo."

In Do's absence Gay had a tendency to relapse into baby talk such as had to be struggled with and overcome when an example had to be set to a baby sister by a big brother, though he resented Mrs. Sims's allusions to geegees and bow-wows as altogether beneath his dignity.

Mrs. Sims was rather restive under the injunction not to go into the opposite flat, which she regarded as "Stuff-a-rubbish!" and as she scoured and scrubbed and polished in her own kitchen she drew fearful pictures of the state of things that must obtain next door, even though "that slut of a woman" had taken herself off; and she was only coerced by Oliver into obedience by permission to concoct a brew of beef-tea after some special recipe of her own, which would give points to all the beef essences or extracts that simple-minded doctors or designing chemists flatter themselves are not to be surpassed.

When she took this across in the middle of the day she had firmly resolved to make it the pretext for penetrating into the fortress, but she came back with all her kindly little stratagems ignominiously defeated by Maisie having put up the chain before she opened the door, which barely allowed room for the jug to be passed in.

"She made a bit of a fuss even about taking the beef-tea in, as I ain't no patience with folks being so hoity-toity when there's illness about; and I had to tell her it would jes' be poured

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down the sink if she would n't have it, as was a shame to waste real good stuff—as it is, though I say it as should n't. And I tell her, Mr. Oliver, if the child don't fancy it—for if she's getting better she's bound to be fractious and fanciful—to take a good cup of it herself, as looks as white as my apron, with them big eyes of her'n as black round as if I'd been at 'em with my blacklead brush. But I tell her how happy Master Gay was making himself, and as how you was going to take him to the Zoological Gardens this afternoon."

"Oh—h—h!" said Oliver at this first and only intimation, though, truth to tell, such an idea had crossed his mind when he found the hazy amount of information Gay had apparently on the subject of monkeys.

"She brightened up directly when I tell her, and says how good you was, and how grateful she feels. So I tell her, not a bit, 't was jes' what you liked, and give you something to do," Mrs. Sims concluded.

"Oh—h—h! To be sure!" meekly from Oliver.

All the same, it is not quite pleasant to hear your good deeds disparaged by other lips, even

though you might sincerely and honestly say the very same yourself.

Perhaps it was partly this feeling that prevented him carrying out the Zoological programme, as he might otherwise have done, and substituting a visit to the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens.

I believe Oliver enjoyed himself there every bit as much as Gay, watching the fleets of little ducks, just balls of yellow down with black button eyes, absurd rudimentary wings, and ridiculous triangular beaks, that managed to annex floating bits of bun as cunningly as if their owners had not been shut up a day or two before from all such experiences in a bluegreen shell.

Besides these there were the toy yachts, that started so trim and gallant and intentional, with nice clean sails and gay little pennons, so that you could hardly believe they were not manned by a tiny crew who were steering and pulling ropes and hauling up sails.

Gay shouted and danced with delight as "the stately ships went on," and could hardly be refrained from casting himself headlong into the water after them. But it was not often that

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these gallant craft reached the other side. There came a moment, with no reason apparent to the ignorant eye, when the course was abruptly altered and the sails showed a decided leaning to one side, and the boat lurched, toppled, and ultimately turned over, and was ignominiously drawn to land by a hook at the end of a long pole, the handiness of which seemed to indicate that such emergencies were not rare nor unexpected.

And if these boats looked trim and intentional when they started, they looked dilapidated and helpless when they were drawn out, limp and draggled, at the other side. Which things are an allegory, moralised Oliver; but Gay, with the fickleness of youth, descried another brandnew vessel preparing to start, and turning his back on the damp and forlorn Royal George and its equally damp and dejected owner, capered gaily off to superintend the launching of the resplendent Valkyrie or Scamew. Which things are also an allegory, though Oliver was too busy safeguarding reckless young feet to point the moral or adorn the tale.

So also was he too busy to notice a lady, with a chocolate dachshund in close attendance, who

paused for a moment as she passed along an adjacent path and curiously regarded the young man following the child and holding the Tamo'-Shanter which its owner had dropped in his excitement, running on with uncovered chestnut curls tossing in the sunlight, and rosy cheeks flushed and bright, and a gay little voice shouting to the laggard adult to make haste.

"Ain't his par wropt up in him?" said a slipshod nursemaid to the observing spectator, naturally concluding that the attentive regard was due to admiration. "And it ain't no wonder, as he's a reg'lar pictur', and favours his par uncommon; don't he, now?"

But Doris Mostyn was not one to exchange sympathy with the vulgar, and she gave a little cold stare that should have been annihilating to the little nursemaid, and drew her skirt haughtily away from the wheel of the perambulator, in which a spotty baby with watery eyes was desperately sucking away at one of those delusive mouthpieces which one would have thought the most infantile mind would soon detect as a gross imposture, incapable of conveying the nourishment demanded, but which seems to have a charm for the young of the human species,

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though a young pig would not tolerate it for five minutes.

The annihilating look failed signally in its effect, for "Ameliar Ann" gazed after Miss Mostyn pityingly as she swept away, and said, "Deaf, pore thing!"

CHAPTER XVI

LITTLE DO

Our tender little dove,
Meek-eyed and simple;
Our love goes home to Love;
There shall she walk in white,
Where God shall be the light,
And God the temple. — CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

LIVER was sitting smoking that night after Gay was in bed. It had not required any stratagem to prevent a hullabaloo; no one thought of such a thing. Mrs. Sims came in quite a matter-of-fact way with a bedroom candlestick in her hand — for, as I have said, she eschewed the electric light as much as possible — and Gay, who was a little bit tired with all the exciting events of the day, and who also had already come to regard the little bed in the corner of Chums's room as "my very own" and "where I always sleep," after the manner of children, went off with the old

woman as contentedly as if it had been the ordinary habit all the nights of his young life.

Oliver was just thinking that when he had finished his pipe he would step across to No. 9 and enquire how the patient was, and ask if there were anything he or Mrs. Sims could do for the comfort of her or her nurse, when a ring at the bell and a somewhat prolonged colloquy with Mrs. Sims at the door announced some visitor; and presently Mrs. Sims put her head in at the door and said Mrs. Maisie wished to speak to him.

"She won't come in, and I tell you what it is, Master Oliver, she's making herself ill over nursing that child; and it's all stuff-a-rubbish shutting us all out, and some one did ought to tell her so, and make her go right off to bed and have a good night's rest. It's a funny thing if an old woman like me, as has had to do with children all my life, can't see after this one, who, she 'lows, is on the mend. It's a wonder as she condescends to ask for some more of that beef-tea. And a precious good thing as I put some on this afternoon, though she vowed and declared this morning as she would n't go for to take another drop. So if you'll go out

and see what she wants to say, I'll go and strain off the beef-tea."

Oliver suspected that accepting the beef-tea might be a ruse to get rid of the kind old woman for a few minutes, for, though he was at the door in a moment, Maisie did not speak till the sound of bustling movements in the kitchen showed that Mrs. Sims was fully occupied.

Maisie was standing by the open window on the landing with her back turned to him; and though the evening was hot she had a shawl thrown over her head, and kept it drawn across her mouth, making her voice sound strange and muffled.

- "Is the boy asleep?" she asked.
- "Yes, half-an-hour and more."
- "Fast asleep?"
- "Sound as a trout."

"I want to see him just once more. Oh! I don't mean that, of course, only I think I shall sleep better — sleep better if I have seen him."

Mrs. Sims had said she ought to have a good night's rest, and now she spoke of sleep, but Oliver thought that there was not much look of nature's sweet restorer in those great feverish dark eyes that just turned on him and then caught themselves away as if she thought they might scorch him—and, indeed, he almost felt as if they did—with their glowing intensity.

"Come in," he said, "by all means. You know I wanted you to come last night. I don't think there is the slightest danger of carrying it from one case to another. It is only taking the breath of the patient that they say is dangerous, leaning over them or kissing them. I hope you are careful about this."

The words which he meant to have been so reassuring seemed to have quite the contrary effect, and she turned back towards her own door.

"Nonsense!" he said almost roughly. "Come in at once or I'll go and fetch Gay out of his bed, and then if he wakes and sees you we shall have a jolly old row and no mistake."

So he turned and led the way along the passage, and she followed him half-eagerly, half-reluctantly, as if she longed yet feared to go.

Oliver had learned already by experience, short as it had been, that it is not easy to wake children, so he turned up the electric light and stepped aside to let her go into the room, pretending himself a sudden interest in one of

the old engravings hanging in the passage, which always looked reproachfully at him, rightly feeling that they deserved a better light than was youchsafed them there.

As he turned up the light he had a glimpse of a very picture of sleeping childhood, lying anyhow in that exquisite grace that no sculptor or painter can adequately depict, and which certainly would have aroused Mrs. Sims's indignation if she could have seen the haycock condition of the bedclothes which she had laid so smooth and tidy a few minutes before.

But Maisie did not go for him, as Oliver expected, and refresh thirsty lips with kissing round young limbs and rosy parted lips. She stood quite still in the doorway, with her head a little turned away; and when Gay stirred and spoke some indistinct words out of a dream, she started back and turned out the light and hurried back to the door. She had forgotten all about the beef-tea, all about Oliver, who followed her with a dim sense of some overwhelming trouble, which he could not move with one of his fingers to help this stricken creature, however willing and anxious he might be.

He thought she was going without another



She stood quite still in the doorway, with her head a little turned away.



word, and had quickly made up his mind to employ the beef-tea she had asked for as an excuse for getting into the opposite flat, but she turned at the door and held out something to him.

"Will you be so very kind as not to open this till to-morrow morning? I can't thank you ——God bless you — and ——" He could not hear the sobbing words that followed, muffled in the shawl, but it was something about little Gay — and goodness. And then she caught herself away as if she could not trust herself to keep back the emotion that was overpowering her, and Oliver stood with the letter in his hand watching the door by which she had disappeared.

"And there! if she ain't gone without the very thing she come for! These young folk's heads never saves their heels — nor other persons' heels neither."

And as no response came to persistent ringing of the bell, Mrs. Sims set down the jug outside the door with a sense of deep injury, and reported to Oliver an hour later that it had not been taken in.

Oliver set the letter that he was not to open till the next morning on the mantelpiece, though he felt more than once impelled to disregard the injunction of the overstrained, excitable woman, who really hardly seemed responsible for her actions.

All through the night he had a nervous, fidgety feeling of apprehension, and once he got up and went to see if the light was out in the opposite flat, and was relieved to see that the beef-tea had been taken in. He heard the sound of some one moving within, which did not look as if Maisie were having that good night Mrs. Sims had prescribed for her, or the sleep that she thought the sight of Gay might ensure.

Then he went back to bed and dreamt of that pictured garden which Do thought was heaven, and that he saw Maisie, with the shawl over her head, coming up the mossy path under the trees leading little Do, who was in the same costume as that in which Gay had paid his first visit, a little white night-gown, and with small bare feet on the moss; and then he saw that it was not Maisie who was leading the child, but the angel, who had come away from guarding the gate to lead the small, uncertain steps, and had given her the flaming sword to play with as she came.

He slept later than usual that morning, and so

did Gay, who was only half-awake when Mrs. Sims came to fetch him for his bath.

The old woman was making mysterious signals of distress to Oliver, and as soon as Gay was safely up to his neck in water, and happily occupied with a sponge and much splashing, she came back.

"For goody gracious get up, Mr. Oliver! I don't know whatever's going on over the way, but there are men coming and going, and they told me to go in and shut the door when I ask a civil question."

Oliver was up and into his dressing-gown in a moment, but when he opened the door the usual quiet reigned on the opposite side of the landing, and only the marks of footsteps on the stairs — for there had been rain in the night — testified that Mrs. Sims's statement had not been founded on imagination.

He was hardly sufficiently dressed to go across and inquire, but he remembered the mysterious letter given him the night before and not to be opened till the morning. Perhaps that would explain the circumstances.

It ran as follows:

"Little Do is dead. She died this evening;

and I have taken the diphtheria. She will be buried to-morrow morning early, and I am going to the hospital. I know you will be good to Gay, and when " (this she had scratched out and substituted "if") "I die his grandfather will have him. Don't be sorry for me and little Do. I always wanted to take her with me, and we sha'n't miss Gay so much if we are together. And please don't come or send to ask for me. I will get them to let you know each day how I am; it will not be long. This is the key of the drawer in my writing-table; there is some money there, and some letters that may be wanted when I have gone. God bless and reward you!—M.S."

Oliver was sitting with the letter and the key in his hand when Mrs. Sims came in.

He was picturing, as sympathetic and imaginative people do, Maisie's night alone with the dead child, so quiet, silence that could be heard, while the forlorn young watcher set her own house in order, preparing for the end which she evidently felt was inevitable, and which Oliver also seemed to feel impending over her. He thought of her, when all the sad little preparations were finished, coming back to the stillness

of the child's room and sitting down by the little bed. She must have been exhausted and ill, and he pictured her falling asleep with her head on the pillow where that quiet sleeper rested so peacefully. Then she would wake with a start to the pain and the loneliness and the loss, and would wander restlessly up and down and look from the windows over the sleeping town.

> "Dear God! the very houses seem asleep, And all that mighty heart is lying still!"

If it had not been so deathly quiet within, she would hardly have noticed the low rumble of the market-carts making their leisurely way into town, with drivers many of them asleep on the heaps of baskets, and the patient horses mechanically treading the well-known way.

And then came the cold dawn creeping into the sky, chill and pale and pitiless, and no living ear to listen to the terrors and fears of what that day might have in store, only the little shell-like ear among the baby curls sealed by the tender hand of Death from the strife of tongues; no friendly voice to speak a word of comfort or encouragement, only the pale parted lips smiling in such serene silence till the ephphatha of the Resurrection morning.

Ugh! Oliver shuddered at the dreary picture he had conjured up. It is bad to have a vivid imagination. We should pray Heaven to give us rhinoceros hides and stodgy, unemotional brains; they save us from a great deal of suffering, out of all proportion to the loss of refined pleasure their possession entails.

Oliver's face was haggard and he was shivering, though the pleasant morning sunshine was pouring in on him, when Mrs. Sims came in, and the sight of him went a long way to counteract the effect of the news on his old nurse's mind. All the world might be dead or suffering, but the first thing to consider was Master Oliver, and Mrs. Sims was ready to bid defiance to illness or death or. I am afraid, any such decrees of Providence if they threatened her master; and the first symptom of this defiance, the opening trumpet-blast, was apt to be an outburst of great wrathfulness with the very object of her devotion. So Oliver received a good, sound rating for sitting there in his dressing-gown - "As ain't hardly decent, and at this time of day, too! and breakfast coming in directly minute, and a mutton-chop as will be done to a turn by the time you're shaved"- the menu having been suddenly altered while Mrs. Sims was speaking. "And them eggs up from Merrifield with a real country taste in them, and the child as hungry as a hunter, bless him!"

There was no time for Mrs. Sims's apron to find its way to her eyes on her own account, so fierce was she in her cooking of Oliver's breakfast (and it would have been as much as his place was worth for Oliver to have left a morsel on his plate), and she bobbed in more than once during the meal to make sure that he was not surreptitiously imparting it to Gay, who was plentifully catered for otherwise.

I fancy her prescription was a judicious one, and that a good breakfast restores shaken nerves and discourages morbid imaginations, and Oliver was quite himself again afterwards and able to consider the situation calmly.

CHAPTER XVII

GREAT TRIBULATION

But if it should be death, do you know what it is, little one? It is only a falling asleep, and you wake and the darkness is gone, ... And we meet all together in heaven —in heaven instead of at home.

HE situation, even considered calmly, was a curious one, and if it had not been for Mrs. Sims's able co-operation, might have been a very embarrassing one; for here was Oliver left with a child on his hands of whose relations he knew nothing at all except that there was a grandfather somewhere in the background, who was only to be communicated with at the last extremity, and whose address, he concluded, was in the drawer in the writingtable, which he was not at liberty to open while Maisie lived.

Like most Englishmen, he hated mystery, and sealed envelopes and locked drawers were an abomination to him; but fate had involved him, quite against his will, in this little drama of his neighbours, and it was no business of his to do

anything to dispel the mystery with which the poor mother chose to surround herself, though he felt convinced that it was really quite unnecessary and uselessly complicated arrangements.

Well, at any rate, he was well contented with his share of the business, the share in question being at that moment entirely engrossed in manipulating an egg—a process that appears simplicity itself to the average adult (though I believe I should add "of English birth," as Americans, I am told, do not understand the art), but which takes both time and attention at Gay's age, what with picking off bits of shell from the top, and dipping long fingers of breadand-butter into the yolk, and keeping the table-napkin well tucked in under a very yellow chin.

This absorption was a great relief to Oliver, who had been skilfully parrying questions from Gay about Maisie and Do, and urgent requests to be allowed to go to the door and wish Maisie "Good-morning."

He was debating in his mind what he should say to Gay, and if he would be able to prevaricate with Gay's earnest, truthful eyes upon him, or make use of the usual conventional phrases by which we are apt to disfigure and render ghastly and gloomy nature's gentle, simple process of death, as kindly and beneficent as the soft fall of the autumn leaves loosened from the branches by the forming of the young buds of next year's spring.

If ever he had children of his own, Oliver thought, such things should be put simply and naturally before them, stripped of all the funereal trappings and nodding plumes, so that they might get a glimpse of the land of pure delight before they saw the crape and coffin-nails with which we see fit to cover the gateway thither.

But before Gay was safely through his egg Mr. Rogers, the landlord of the flats, was announced, and Oliver took him into the next room.

He was a good-natured, kind-hearted man at bottom, but, after being landlord of two hundred flats for some years, he had arrived at that state of mind in which, had he been one of our four-footed brethren, he would have put all his four feet together, tucked in his head, and refused to budge in response to either rein, whip, or spur, or even the offer of a tempting and juicy carrot held in front of his nose. Each of his two hundred tenants thought him an obstinate old donkey, deaf to all reasonable demands; and so he was, but

it was in consequence of having to turn a deaf ear to so many unreasonable demands, each of his tenants thinking his — or, worse still, her — own matters of paramount importance, and being naturally indignant at any such insignificant trifles as the neighbours' concerns being considered for a moment. I think he must have had a constant nightmare to disturb his well-earned rest, of kitchen sinks, boilers, paint and plaster, dust-bins and electric bells, and delirium of complaints about dogs and porters, violin practice and pingpong. Truly, the path of a landlord of flats may lead pretty straight to affluence, but there must be side-issues leading to Colney Hatch or a noose of rope in a quiet corner.

Oliver had always got on well with Mr. Rogers, and he had not been there long enough to get his taps or electric bells out of order, and he stoically endured ear-piercing roulades from below, and the irritating noise that gives pingpong its name from across the road, so his face and his handwriting had not begun to stink in the nostrils of his landlord.

The old man was in an evident state of perturbation this morning, and being rather stout, he was somewhat out of breath from his ascent of the stairs; for he usually allowed Mahomet, when he inhabited the upper flats, to come to his office round the corner when he wished for an interview, instead of hoisting the mountain up all those steps to see Mahomet in a flat suspended, like that worthy's coffin, in mid-air.

"Bad job that child's dying at No. 9," he said before Oliver had time to shut the door behind him to prevent a certain little pitcher from using long ears.

"Very," said Oliver; "I thought she was getting better."

"Yes; so did the doctor till last night. Heart failure at last. And the poor young lady ill too; and if a word of it gets about the Mansions a pretty life I shall be led. I shall have half-adozen screeching at me at once."

"Why need it get about the Mansions?"

"Well, 't was just that I came about. Of course, you're bound to know all about it; you've got the boy, and Mrs. Frampton asked me to give you the key when the men have done disinfecting, and any letters that come for her. But I'll wager your servant has n't held her tongue; I never knew a woman who could."

"I don't suppose she could in the country

among her own friends, but she's at daggers drawn with the servants here, whom she regards as dirty sluts."

"She's about right there. I tell you the sight of some of the kitchens is enough to turn you up. But your cook is the old-fashioned sort, and does n't go out dressed up like her betters, and with double the airs. One blessing is, these fine madams don't get up and about betimes or they might have seen the ambulance, and the coffin being brought down. Dr. Grove managed it all, and if we can only keep it quiet and not get a scare through the Mansions I shall feel beholden to him to the end of my days;" and Mr. Rogers wiped the perspiration from his troubled brow.

"I'll give Mrs. Sims a hint," Oliver said, "and she'll be all right. But there's that charwoman, Mrs. Jones; she's a tongue and a half."

"Oh, I 've settled her!" Mr. Rogers answered, with a grim smile. "She came bouncing into my office directly the doctor had said what was up, and I told her her goose was cooked if she let on a word about it; as, first of all, no one would dream of having her to work straight out of infection, and if they did I'd give orders to the porters that she should n't set her foot inside the

Mansions. My wife is giving her a bit of cleaning this week, and rubbing it well into her about holding her tongue; and she's got her bread to earn for herself and half-a-dozen children, so she ought to know which side it's buttered. I suppose you know the family, as you've taken the boy?"

"No—o," Oliver answered hesitatingly. Put into words, it seemed such an absurdly quixotic action to take a child of whom he knew nothing. "Have they been here long?"

"Well, it, must have been Ladyday three years ago she came. The boy was a baby, and the little girl was expected. I think she said her husband was abroad; a military gent, I fancy. But there! I get so mixed with one and another, I can't be sure. She said he might be home any day — or perhaps it was that she was going out to him; but, anyway, soon after the baby was born she heard that he was dead. She had an old nurse with her then, something after the manner of your servant, but she left, and since then they've had Mrs. Jones. And I don't fancy the cash was plentiful, but all I can say is that my rent was paid as regular as clockwork, and I never heard of their running any bills. Some of

them down below "-with a motion of the thumb to indicate the dwellers in the lower flats -"began to be nasty and ask questions - you know what ladies is! - as to whether there ever was a Mr. Frampton, and if it was quite respectable; and I don't mind telling you, Mr. Bruce, that I had to tell a pack of lies one way and another, for I did n't know any more than they did, except that they were as quiet and nicespoken a lot as I 've ever had to deal with. So I talked as if I'd known Mr. Frampton all my life, though I've never set eyes on him, and as if I was quite satisfied - which, to tell the truth, I was not. But, anyhow, I stopped the talk, though it came up again a bit when Mrs. Frampton took to playing at concerts. I reckon she was obliged to do something to make two ends meet, and one could n't help feeling sorry for a young thing like that making such a struggle and being so independent-like. Why, she 'd snap one 's head off if one ventured to say a word, even a kind one."

When once old Rogers was started he ran on without requiring assistance beyond "Oh, indeed!" or "So I suppose!" or "Not at all!" from Oliver who was interested in the narrative, though he felt that what was sauce for the goose

was sauce for the gander, and that the private concerns of his neighbour were no more his concern than they were that of the three old maids on the ground-floor, whose somewhat acid curiosity Mr. Rogers took especial pleasure in baffling.

But perhaps the possession of Gay gave him a right to be better informed, and the thought of the child suddenly suggested to his mind that that young hero was unwontedly quiet, for he must long ere this have finished his egg; and if Mrs. Sims had prevented him from coming to find Oliver he should have heard him in the next room, where her indefatigable broom was distinctly audible.

So when Mr. Rogers rose to go Oliver hastened to see what mischief idle hands might have found to do. The passage being narrow, and Mr. Rogers not being so, Oliver was obliged to waive the civility of showing him out, as in flats you have to reckon matters of space with some nicety; so he himself turned into the diningroom, expecting vague catastrophes in the way of upset ink, or damage to especially prized books, or excursions into carefully arranged papers. On finding the room empty, he had time for a pang of dread at the open window (what a fussy

old hen he was getting over his one chick!) before a prolonged ring at the bell took him hastily to the door, which had only just closed on Mr. Rogers's substantial back.

There was Gay in the very same place where Oliver had first made his acquaintance, only now he was more clothed than on his first appearance. He was clinging with one hand to the handle of the door, from which Mr. Rogers had evidently been trying to remove him, and with the other was battering against the irresponsive wood, and calling in a piteously passionate little voice, broken and choked with sobs, on "Maisie! Maisie! Maisie!" to come and let him in,

No doubt some words of Mr. Rogers had caught his ear before the door closed, and he had quitted the intricacies of his egg and managed to let himself out of the door. Oliver remembered now that Mr. Rogers had stumbled over something in the passage, and had given vent to a stifled remark not worth recording, no doubt the obstacle being the footstool Gay made use of to reach otherwise unattainable heights. He had managed to reach the bell opposite, and in the empty, silent flat thrilled and vibrated the sound

through the rooms where the sulphur fumes hung blue and stifling, and where the bed still showed the outline of a small coffin that had rested there, and where a dress lay across a chair, suggesting strangely the grace of the slight figure that had worn it. In the desolate sitting-room the sweet face in the picture smiled down as calmly bright as of one who could see, through or above earth's troubles, the great purpose that this unintelligible life is working out; and opposite the sunshine lay on the sweet garden which Gay called home, and which Do had mistaken for heaven. She was what Gay called "a stoopid little girl" then; "Now she knows more than any of the wisest of us," Oliver thought.

But just now Oliver had to comfort a forlorn little heart, the first part of the business being to disengage fat, clinging hands as tenderly as might be from the brass door-handle, and pick up a very sturdy little body, which resented such kindly offices with kicks, and to silence as quickly as possible the cries which bid fair to proclaim Gay's trouble in very truth from the housetop, and so render futile all Mr. Rogers's well-meant intentions of keeping matters quiet and avoiding a scare in the Mansions.

Mrs. Sims undertook Gay's consolation first, assuming naturally that when affliction wrings the brow a woman would understand best the rôle of ministering angel.

But affliction in this instance seemed to wring the legs, and it is not easy to gather a stricken deer to your bosom when it is kicking and struggling for dear life, or to soothe sobs and cries when they have once got that hoarse sound which we call naughtiness in children and hysterics in adults; and when he proceeded to hold his breath and get black in the face Mrs. Sims fled into the room where Oliver sat trying not to hear, and implored his aid. She was flushed and tearful, her apron was torn, and her cap jauntily on one side.

"I don't know whatever to do with him. He'll have a fit if he goes on so, and them big, fat children is always the worst; they goes off like the snuff of a candle. I says to myself first time I see him as he was just the child to go off sudden in convulsions, and if you had n't been so set on having him I'd"——

This was a bit hard on Oliver, as the reader will admit, but he did not wait to hear the end of this wisdom after the event, but left the old woman to smooth her ruffled feathers and console herself by casting the blame on him, and went into the kitchen without a notion how to meet the emergency.

He stood for a minute without saying a word, and Gay, who had been receiving voluble torrents of comforting and coaxing and showers of attempted caresses, which he had parried energetically, was puzzled at this silent spectator, whose boots alone Gay could see out of the corner of his eye as he lay face downwards on the hearthrug. I always thought that before Job's comforters were led away into vain words their silent sympathy should have been very soothing, when "they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him, for they saw that his grief was very great."

So perhaps little Gay felt a sympathy in those boots standing on the other side of the kitchen table, and also, by-and-by, a sort of curiosity as to what the eyes above the boots were looking at, so the sobs gradually lost some of their violence; and presently, as the silence still continued, a curly head appeared above the horizon of the kitchen table, and a very smeared little miser-

able face, with hardly any blue eyes visible, met Oliver's gaze.

"Hullo!" he said. "What a dirty face you've got! Come and have a wash, and then we'll write to Maisie."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ZOO

Soon as I careless strayed, fond youth with eyes averted, Phillis I met by all the swains deserted.

Swift she (tho? late so coy) then flew to meet me.

RS. SIMS was never quite sure if she altogether approved of Oliver's method of comforting Gay. When any one has lived a longish life and met troubles in a certain conventional way, it is not easy suddenly to adopt a new line of treatment, to put your handkerchief away in your pocket (an inaccessible position usually when the mourner is a woman), to roll up the crape and hatbands into a ball and throw them into the waste-paper basket, to pull up the blinds and let the light in, and to speak of the dead dear one in an ordinary tone of voice and without the prefix of "poor" or the suffix of a sigh.

To such an one there seems something almost profane in hearing a dead person's name introduced into ordinary — or, still worse, jocose — conversation just for all the world as if they were still alive (are they not?), and Mrs. Sims was free to confess that she felt a cold shiver down the back when she heard Gay's cheerful little voice shouting the name of his dead sister in the midst of some of his uproarious games with Oliver, and quoting what "Do always says," or pointing out which were her toys and small possessions, or telling stories about her not always strictly on the principle of *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*.

The only point on which Mrs. Sims insisted, and which she successfully carried, was that Gay should have a little black suit, for she threatened to procure one out of her own money if Oliver begrudged the few shillings to enable the child to show respect to the memory of the poor little angel; which, it need hardly be said, was not the reason of Oliver's objection.

Respect seemed hardly the sentiment to be aroused by the memory of the little fat baby whom Oiiver had tickled and kissed and tossed in the air, but Gay was also urgent on the subject, as he had emerged from that tumult of grief with the intention of being a man — a man, to

be sure, at first shaken with convulsive sobs, and requiring a seat on Oliver's knee and a reassuring arm round him, and permission to dive into Oliver's pocket after a large silk handkerchief to comfort a very swelled nose and slits of eyes.

I think the first little wintry smile, that irradiated his face, arose over Oliver's investigations of knees on which the brick hearth in the kitchen had left marks, and the remark that trousers would be more suitable than petticoats for any one who was going to be such a brave man. I think Gay really pictured a suit exactly like Oliver's in miniature, and was a shade disappointed that knees were still in evidence under the short trousers, of which he was, however, inordinately proud. If only he could have heard what Do thought of those trousers he would have been perfectly satisfied. She had always been a little envious of his superior sex, and at one time had cherished hopes that she might grow up into a little boy, and now Gay was rather shaky as to the sex of the departed, being confused by Mrs. Sims speaking of them as angels.

However, such pictures of angels as Oliver could turn up to show Gay were generally clad in very feminine raiment, so Gay had still the satisfaction of feeling that Do would envy his man-like attire, even in those fair gardens of Paradise which Oliver described to him. Do what he could, Oliver could not help his descriptions of that garden conveying to Gay's mind the idea of that in the picture in the opposite flat, though Gay had been severe and contemptuous when little Do confused the two; and sometimes when he and Oliver were following Do in imagination over sunny grass or shady paths, Gay would suggest that perhaps she was going to the hen-house, and Oliver was obliged to pull up and return to more conventional ideas of the other life.

It was about Maisie that Oliver found it most difficult to talk, for the daily bulletins from the hospital brought the same information, that she was very ill and no better.

Who could tell when Gay asked about Maisie, in those twilight talks with Oliver when bedtime drew near, whether she too might not be in the twilight of life's evening, with the night closing in around her? And when such thoughts come into the mind voices grow hushed, and we listen through the silly noises of this little world for the passing of the messenger, "the strong-winged

evangel," bearing the summons, "The Master is come and calleth for thee."

So Oliver would turn the talk to the little one who was safe in the "sweet fields beyond the swelling flood," and keep the thought of one who might be crossing now till Gay was in bed and he need not fear the earnest scrutiny of the child's eyes peering through the twilight and reading the sadness in his face.

How little he really knew of her when he came to reckon such knowledge up! There was their first meeting when he had thought her defiant and ungrateful and neglectful of the children, followed by casual meetings on the stairs when she had slipped by with hardly a recognition. There was that flash of sympathy when their eyes met across the crowded drawing-room at Lady Ventnor's "At Home." But when he came so far in his reckoning other and disquieting reflections came in to disturb the quiet sadness of his thoughts of Maisie, and a fidgety remembrance of a letter that was to have been written to Doris, and at this juncture he generally got up - and turned on the light, remembering that he had not even looked at the morning paper.

. Mrs. Sims was very severe on Oliver for spoil-

ing Gay, but it need scarcely be said that she was much the worse of the two in this respect, and the small hero tyrannised over her in the most bare-faced manner. He even allured her into scaling the giddy heights of an omnibus, where she sat transfixed with terror, till she was compelled to expostulate with the driver on the reckless way in which he was driving along Piccadilly, with vehicles bearing down upon him from every direction and he "jogging along as calm as if he'd got a turnpike road all to himself."

Her expostulations nearly brought about the catastrophe they were intended to avert, as the driver went into such roars of laughter ("Impident feller!"), and was so anxious to impart the joke to the conductor, that he ignored the signals of a stately policeman who was stemming the tide of traffic by a movement of the hand, and nearly came into collision with a van in consequence.

In those beautiful June days, so long and sunny and sweet (even in London), and with a small bright-eyed companion vividly interested in everything, Oliver found life very endurable, and just drifted along, taking no thought for the morrow, which would probably take Gay away from

him, or for the past, with its reproachful memory of a letter that had never been written.

It need scarcely be said that the Zoological Gardens was a favourite resort in those days, and that Gay's ignorance on the subject of beasts in general and monkeys in particular was speedily rectified.

Gay did not find Mrs. Sims a satisfactory companion at the Zoo, her feelings towards any animals beyond those of the farmyard being a mixture of horror and disgust.

"Don't you go near the nasty things, Master Gay. They didn't ought to show such ugly brutes; and them cages don't look half strong enough, to my mind!"

The monkeys struck her, I fancy, as downright profane, a sort of caricature of the Creator's handiwork, the contemplation of which seriousminded people should avoid.

Oliver found a fierce discussion raging one day in the kitchen, Gay sitting on the kitchen fender, and Mrs. Sims, with very floury hands and a flushed countenance, making pastry.

The subject under discussion was as to whether there were monkeys in the Garden of Eden, Gay maintaining that there were lots, racing about, up and down the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and all over the place. Mrs. Sims had been drawn by her horror at such an idea into lengths which on consideration she regretted, declaring that only domestic animals were to be found there — lambs and Alderney cows and —

"Pigs?" fiendishly suggested Gay; leading to bridling and close attention to the rolling-pin, and remarks apparently addressed to the flour-sifter of "Little boys did n't ought to talk of things as they don't understand!" a feminine way of avoiding a difficult point in an argument that Oliver well remembered being practised in old days; and she altogether ignored Gay's conclusive proof of the truth of his theory, the display of the wooden monkey out of the Noah's Ark, with a scarlet apple in its hands, and ordered it peremptorily off the kitchen table.

Camels were also a trial to the old woman, being so unlike the stately animals represented in Bible picture-books as conveying Rebecca to Isaac, and bringing the Ishmaelites from Gilead with spicery, balm, and myrrh, and taking Joseph down to Egypt.

Neither did the lions realise her idea of those to whom Daniel was thrown, though there was something in their great yellow eyes, gazing away beyond the insignificant crowds of sight-seers to some vast desert distance invisible to our sight, that awed her and prevented her making depreciatory remarks till she was round the corner and out of their majestic presence; while she freely commented to his face on the shabby, shambling, out-at-elbows camel, with his fretfully feeble mouth and flopping hump.

So Gay found Oliver a far more congenial companion, and they got on very friendly terms with some of the animals, notably with one rather sickly, melancholy monkey in one corner, who put out surreptitiously, with quick glances to right and left, a thin, cold little hand to be shaken or to receive bits of sugar or bananas, which were transferred hastily to a cheek already considerably distended.

They also made friends with a keeper, and when Oliver had had enough of the atmosphere of the monkey-house, he could safely leave Gay in his charge, with strict injunctions to avoid the blue-nosed baboon, and he himself would seek the outer air and sit under a tree till Gay was ready to come away — or, rather, till Oliver was obliged to go and tear him away from the fas-

cinating company. I fancy that the friendly keeper admitted Gay into the arcana of the monkey-house not generally revealed to visitors, and that he was allowed to visit sick monkeys in seclusion, and to assist in the feeding of pathetic little sufferers with terribly human faces, all the more piteous for their absurdity.

So sometimes Oliver sat for some considerable time reading or watching the people come and go in all their wonderful variety, a variety perhaps as conspicuously displayed at the Zoo as at any of the London shows.

It was on one of these occasions, when he had been sitting sleepily watching sundry groups, that he became conscious of some one coming towards him with a recognising look and smile.

It had been a hot day, for midsummer was at its height, and Gay and Oliver had had an early tea and come to the gardens for the evening. It was curious what proportions afternoon tea had assumed during the three weeks that Gay had been with Oliver. It used to be only an occasional thing, a cup of tea brought in if he happened to be at home at Mrs. Sims's tea-time, but now it was a meal requiring a cloth spread over the table, to which you sat squarely up, and

in certain cases demanding a pinafore. And in proportion as afternoon tea increased in importance, so did dinner become less of a function; it became a movable feast, and lost much of its state and ceremony, scarcely, indeed, deserving the sacred name of dinner at all, but coming more under the homelier head of supper.

To-day this nondescript meal was to take place whenever the fascinations of the monkeys allowed them to return — "As there won't be nothing to spoil," Mrs. Sims said, with more indulgence than she generally accorded to Oliver.

The sun was sinking westward in a cloudless sky, and already over such horizons as you could see there was gathering that soft, purplish haze, due to smoke and heat, into which by-and-by the sun would dip, showing a big red face through it before it slipped out of sight, with no gorgeous pageant of sunset crimson and gold, and only sending back a flush all over the sky as a general good-night. But it was still clear of the haze, and able to send through the acacia-tree under which Oliver sat, shafts full of dancing motes and specks of insect-life; which, I suppose, are really everywhere, though the effect is that the sun is pouring them down in a crowded ray, with

sharp lines dividing the busy gangway from the empty air on either side.

Oliver's eyes were dazzled with looking at one such ray, so he did not at once recognise who it was that was crossing the grass towards him, till Doris Mostyn was close in front of him, with that very ray shining on her pretty soft hair and graciously smiling face.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Yes, dear, our love is slain;
In the cold grave for evermore it lies,
Never to wake again,
Or light our sorrow with its starry eyes,
And so—regret is vain. — MISS PROCTER.

THINK that Doris Mostyn must have had a real liking for Oliver Bruce at the bottom of her heart; otherwise I cannot account for her motive for suddenly leaving the party she was with and going across to speak to him when she saw him sitting there alone.

She had certainly been desperately offended by that telegram of his, and still more at receiving no explanatory letter after that call when she had been not at home to him. She had listened to his interview with her parlour-maid that afternoon, and had half-relented at the sound of startled dismay in his voice. She had been a little capricious and contradictory in her treat-

ment of Ralph Shirley, though he came by special invitation, and had shown herself a little bored by his lively conversation, and had been annoyed at his noticing poor Oliver's flowers on the side-table and at his asking for a button-hole out of them.

If she had not wished to prove to herself that she did not care for the giver of the flowers, and that any one might have them for the asking, she would have refused Ralph's request and sent him off with a flea in his ear instead of a Maréchal Niel in his button-hole; and, as it was, she grudgingly picked out a rather worm-eaten bud, though to Oliver's suspicious eye at a distance in Kensington Gardens it might have been the choicest blossom of the lot.

Each day that brought no explanatory letter, while it made her more angry with him, caused her certainly to think more about him, and rendered the society of Ralph Shirley less acceptable to her, though he seemed to pervade the house in those days and did his best to be agreeable to her.

The more she thought of Oliver's extraordinary behaviour the more plain it became to her that it must be due to some entanglement, very

probably with that mysterious next-door neighbour of his; but, being a sensible young woman, who had seen a good deal of the world with interested eyes, and read many novels in which great social problems of life were discussed more or less delicately, and had seen the same subjects portrayed with exquisite passion and pathos on the stage, she was quite willing to condone the past (every man has a past!) and let bygones be bygones (there are always bygones!), only she did not quite know how to convey to Oliver's mind the sweet reasonableness of her feelings.

I am not sure that Doris Mostyn did not like Oliver all the better for her suspicions of his moral character. There are girls who are made so, and to whom Sir Galahad would be a shade mawkish and tame by the side of some of the less stainless Knights of the Round Table. Ah me! while this is not an uncommon sentiment among girls, can you wonder that the Sir Galahads are few?

So when she caught sight of Oliver sitting solitary and, as she thought, forlorn under a tree in the Zoological Gardens, she came across to him with a sudden resolution that she would somehow make him understand that there was no need

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to build up a barrier between them. It was not as if she were a girl in her teens. Parents and guardians generally managed this sort of thing, but it was no use to expect anything of her father; and even if her mother had been living it is doubtful if she would have been equal to the emergency.

She began by lightly bantering him on his shameful behaviour in not coming the day she expected him—"When I had put off half-adozen engagements and refused myself to heaps of other callers!"

"As you did to me next day," Oliver said.

She blushed and laughed. "Well, don't you think I had a right to feel a little vexed? But, do you know, I had half a mind to call you back as I watched you go down the steps. Really, Oliver, I could almost have cried when Edith brought in those lovely La France roses!"

I think if she had called the roses by the right name Oliver's heart might have melted towards her; not, of course, that he was such a pedant as to be offended by a slip of the tongue, as this might easily have been, but because it was somehow so typical of Doris's nature, that

strain after effective little turns with a trifling false note in them.

"I was dreadfully cross to Mr. Shirley when he happened to drop in soon afterwards."

("Happened? By invitation," Oliver commented mentally.)

"But you gave him a rose."

"How did you know? He bothered me into giving him one. But I have never thanked you for them. They were perfectly sweet!"

"I was inclined to pitch them into the gutter when your maid shut the door in my face."

"I am so sorry! Will you forgive me, and own that I had a certain amount of justification for my vexation?"

She held out a small hand very prettily, and as he took it he felt a momentary flickering return of the enchantment that had worked so powerfully at Rutland Gate.

"It is I who should ask forgiveness," he said; "but when I tell you"—— He hesitated.

"Yes," she said, "that is what I want. We are such old friends, Oliver; there need be no secrets between you and me."

"There's no secret exactly about it," he answered a little stiffly. Her sympathetic manner

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was somewhat too *empressée* for the subject in hand, which, after all, was only serving up a civil excuse for a broken engagement.

They were sitting side by side now, and the sun was no longer pouring those thoroughfares of insect-life between the leaves of the tree, the roof of the camel-house having stopped the gay procession before it reached Oliver and his companion.

"Now tell me," she said, settling herself to listen, unfurling the big fan that is so useful an implement in difficult conversations, concealing treacherous movements of the mouth (a feature more difficult to school into concealment of the thoughts than the eyes) and requiring occasionally sudden attention to some slight difficulty in opening and closing it, which accounts for a pause or a hesitation or the avoidance of your companion's eye.

And then, as he still hesitated, she said, with close investigation of the pivot on which the fan works: "That pretty little boy, was n't it?"

She felt his quick look round at her though she could not see it.

[&]quot;What — Gay?" he said.

[&]quot;Is that his name? What a pretty one!"

"Well," he went on, with a laugh, "I don't know how you guessed that he was the culprit who prevented me from keeping my engagement that afternoon, but as a matter of fact he was. I think you saw him once on the staircase at my Mansions, and I often wanted to tell you about him. You know his mother lived in the flat opposite to mine?"

"Yes?"

"And I didn't know anything of them till about a month ago."

"Did n't you know them before you came to London?"

"No. How should I?" And then he told her of his first introduction to Gay, and of the subsequent events ending in the child's coming to stay with him, and of the little sister's death, and the mother's illness and removal to the hospital. All the pathos of the story thrilled him as he told it—the lonely young mother and the two little children, apparently without a friend in the world, casting themselves on the pity of a mere stranger like himself. Little expressions of regret and sympathy punctuated his narrative, always with a slightly jarring note; but when he had finished and glanced at her face, there was a

strange expression on it as she narrowly examined the tassel of her fan.

For a moment he did not understand it, and then it dawned upon him that she did not believe him; and with that quick sensitiveness which often made him see things with other people's eyes, he realised how improbable the incidents might appear, and the construction she was putting upon them.

He remembered, in that odd way in which we remember trifles at serious junctures of our lives. how in the childish days a much-treasured doll of hers had been lost, and she accused him of having made away with it. He could recall the whole scene - the angry sobs of the child, and the efforts of the nurse to calm and console her. and he standing up, miserable and indignant, doggedly denying his guilt. "There, there, missy! Master Oliver did n't mean no harm; and one of its eyes was out! He'll get you another much prettier. Won't you, Master "But I did n't touch the thing!" "Oh, never mind! Say you're sorry and won't do it again. What do it signify? She'll make herself sick with crying, and her ma will give it me for letting her. There! kiss and be friends."

And then he remembered how the child was coaxed to forgive him for what he had not done, and his own ungracious acceptance of the reconciliation, and perfunctory visit to the toyshop in Merrifield in quest of a doll, and the sense of injustice that lingered in his mind.

And now Doris believed him to have been involved in some intrigue, and yet to have sat there in cold blood and told her a whole pack of lies about it.

And yet she did not rise up and shake off the dust of their friendship, which in such circumstances must have been contaminating, but sat there with that pretty little dimpling smile on her face, examining her fan with eyes that, when for a moment they met his, had no flash of indignation or painful disillusionment, but only a tender, half-playful reproach, such as the baby child might have displayed when the nurse bade them "kiss and be friends."

I think the last remnant of the enchantment died away as Oliver realised, not that she believed him capable of some unworthy intrigue and of lying about it to her, but that, believing this of him, she was willing to condone it.

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Did girls think so little of purity and truth? Not such girls as Oliver Bruce could love.

There was a pause—a long pause, it seemed to Oliver, and perhaps to Doris too. A burst of mirthless laughter from the hyenas and the deep tragic roar of a lion broke the silence between them—a silence that was something more than the lack of present speech, as it was the beginning of a lifelong silence between two hearts that might have joined in love's old sweet song.

And presently Doris shut her fan with a jerk — she found it was broken when she got home — and stood up. The smile was still on her lips, but it was a little bit stiff and did not quite correspond with her eyes, which had a steely tone in their blue.

"Well," she said, "I must be going. My friends will be wondering what has become of me. We shall be leaving London soon, but I hope we may meet on our return. Thanks awfully"—as Oliver picked up her parasol. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER XX

THE WAY INTO DO'S GARDEN

The path to heaven is steep and straight And scorched, but ends in shade of trees, Where yet awhile we sing and wait And gather palm-branches. — CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

LL these things are against me" was the text that kept reverting to Oliver's mind again and again next morning, for everything seemed to combine to hinder his efforts to get off quickly and quietly in answer to a summons from Maisie.

Mrs. Sims had unfortunately seen the official-looking envelope from the Metropolitan Fever Hospital, and in spite of all her previous declarations of disbelief in infection and all the "stuff-arubbish" talked about it, took alarm at the idea of Oliver venturing into the midst of such danger; and though she did not say much, walked about looking as if Oliver were a second Defoe going to explore the plague-pits of Aldgate.

"I says nothing, but I thinks the more!" was plainly written on her face as Oliver gave directions for Gay's dinner and an afternoon in Kensington Gardens, and requested that a chop or some other movable feast should await the uncertain hour of his return.

Gay was persistently curious as to where he was going, and hung about him while he tried to finish a letter for the morning post.

Then, to his annoyance, he noticed a written addition to the ordinary printed notice, to the effect that, owing to some of the wards in the Fulham District Hospital being closed for repairs, Mrs. Frampton had been transferred to Homerton, a locality that appeared to Oliver to be somewhere in the Antipodes.

It was a hot, sultry day, and the underground railway more than usually stuffy and sulphurous. Being Saturday, the outside of the tram at Farringdon Street was full, and he had to sit inside between a fat woman with a cross baby and a boy eating green gooseberries over Funny Folks—too funny, apparently, to be safely combined with such light refreshments.

It was his first experience, too, of oriental London, and he was disposed to thank his stars

that he was occidental, like Queen Elizabeth, as he observed the pungent odours of gas and fried fish; the young men and maidens on their way home from work dawdling round the ice-cream barrows, or studying the pictures of the latest murder in the *Police News*; the slipshod mothers looking stealthily over the scraps of doubtfullooking meat on the butchers' stalls, and the general atmosphere of sordid staleness. Truly, one must live twenty years or so in these parts to learn their subtle charms; after that, I am told, you never wish to live anywhere else.

So on — down the noisy, crowded Hackney Road, and up Mare Street, and then Oliver's disgust modified to relief, and even interest, as he escaped from the cross baby and green gooseberries, and found himself standing under the trees of old Hackney Churchyard, looking up at the fine old tower, and round on the rows of tombstones with their quaint, pompous inscriptions. Who slept there, unheeding the tramp of many passing feet? What strange tales could that old graveyard tell?

As he walked on through Homerton, Oliver wondered if those quiet sleepers had lived in the picturesque red and brown old houses, if bright eyes had peeped from the heavy, white-sashed windows, and love-tales been told under the big cedar-trees that still survive among dull, common-place surroundings, relics of romances that lie buried in the old gray tombs.

Up Homerton Row and along the high, blank walls of the Fever Hospital, that shut in so much terrible danger and disease. And yet it seemed to Oliver as he turned in at the big gates and waited his turn for admission at the gate-keeper's window as if all the terrors of the place had vanished in the broad daylight of cheerful, common-sense hygiene.

Everything and every one looked so aggressively clean and cheerful! Even the ambulance that had just stopped before the door of the "receiving-room" drew up with a swing to let out a cheerful, white-capped nurse bearing a flannel bundle in her arms.

"All right, sonny; don't cry. Here we are. Mammy's coming presently if you're a good boy."

Two girls stood at the window debating with the porter the propriety of acid tablets and cherries as food for the sick.

"You can take the acid drops to the nurse if

you like, but it's no use bringing cherries here; they're not allowed."

Then the girls went in, and an anxious young father and mother, with a bunch of flowers and a squeaking doll, passed in next. And then came Oliver's turn.

"No friends admitted unless the name's on the gate," said the porter, eyeing Oliver suspiciously. "Frampton, did you say? Oh yes; Margaret Frampton. You can go in. Third door on the left's the waiting-room. They will tell you which ward there."

Then Oliver wandered on through a very long lime-washed corridor, redolent of carbolic cleanliness, and finally found himself in a room where the two girls he had seen before and the anxious parents were arraying themselves in hideous hooded garments, something between a cabman's mackintosh and an evangelical surplice. However, the parents were too anxious to notice such outside matters, and the girls giggled and drew the hoods over smart hats and curly fringes, and stumped briskly off, ejaculating: "My lor', Liz! you do look a cough-drop." "Same 'ere, 'Ria!"

"Must I put on one of those things?" asked Oliver, grimly surveying a row hung up on pegs.

"Yes, please," said the attendant nurse, smiling as he proceeded to array himself. "Over the head, please; that's right. No one's allowed in the wards without. Let me see; what name did you say?" opening a large book. "Let me see. Frampton — Frampton. — Nurse Jones, was n't it Frampton came in yesterday evening?"

"Scarlets or dips? I don't remember."

"Oh, here it is: Margaret Frampton, Andrew Ward. Here, nurse; you're going that way. You might just take that gentleman round."

More corridors, and up some steps; then a parley with a nurse at the door of a long, cheerful ward bearing the title "Mary."

"The doctor's in 'Andrew' just now. You must wait. They won't be very long, if you like to sit down here."

"Mary" seemed to be a children's ward, most of them, the nurse explained, getting better; and there was a good deal of cheerfulness among the more advanced convalescents, and small patients still in bed, with cleanly cropped heads and red flannel jackets, accompanied by dolls and scrapbooks.

One small boy was being fed through a very short snub nose by a long india-rubber pipe, one

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end of which joined a glass cup in the nurse's hand, from which milk was disappearing rapidly.

"Is he very ill?" asked Oliver, in horrified curiosity.

The nurse laughed. "Ill? Oh no; he's a lot better. — Ain't you, Tommy? Going to have an egg for tea to-morrow if he's a good boy. — He is a lazy little beggar," she added as she crossed the room to wash the empty cup; "won't try a bit. They're often like that when they get used to the tube. Why, we had a little girl went out yesterday who was on the tube for five weeks and would n't eat her food for nobody. Why, she actually cried and kicked up no end of a bother because she wanted the egg through her nose!"

Oliver shuddered and turned to a further corner of the ward, where a little flannel tent was placed over a cot, while a big kettle set on a gasstove outside was discharging volumes of steam under the cover.

"Tracheotomy case," said the nurse, motioning over her shoulder.

"May I go and see?"

"Yes; but don't go too near. She's a nervous little thing, and shocking frightened of the doctors."

Inside the tent sat a nurse watching the tiny, restless creature turning about uneasily on her pillow. Every few minutes she cleared with a feather the silver tube through which the rapid breathing came hurrying out.

"Any hope?" he asked.

"Not much; but she's a strong child and takes plenty still, so we may pull her through."

Oliver sat down again, thinking of little Do dying in the small close room with nothing but the mother's ignorant love, and he blamed himself for not insisting on her removal here, where all that human skill can do is ready to hand.

Just then a nurse came to the door beckoning to him.

"You can come now. But please don't stay long if it's 'forty-five' you've come to see; she's very bad."

Maisie! Proud Maisie! Ah! as Oliver stood looking down at her he felt how truly it has been said, "It is sown in dishonour." Some people call death beautiful; surely it is hideous! And the light and calm and peace sometimes to be found are not death, but the dawning of the new life.

She lay half-propped up by pillows, turning

her head restlessly about as if to find ease for the loud, difficult breathing. The big dark eyes were half-closed and dull, but they opened wide and brightened as he called her by her name, "Maisie."

In the presence of death formality drops away, and he used the children's name for their mother as naturally as if she had been his sister. "Maisie, I've come. Don't you know me?"

She gave a slight sign of assent, and then began trying to speak in a thick, indistinct voice. "Gay—little Gay," she said.

"Gay? Oh, he's all right! Don't bother about him. I'll see to him. Is there anything you want done?"

He bent down to catch what she said, and the nurse intervened. "Visitors must n't bend over patients' beds," she said sharply; "against rules."

"Oh, let be!" Oliver said impatiently, pushing her aside. "I must hear. I shall be all right."

Maisie held out her left hand, pointing feebly to the wedding-ring hanging loosely on her thin finger.

"Tell father — it was all right — he need not be ashamed. Frampton Shirley was my husband. — Poor Frampton! — You will find it in my drawer."

"I know," he said, all his senses quickened by the passionate desire to understand; "the marriage certificate."

"And a letter. You will take Gay to father — and Juliet. Don't write — take him."

"Yes, yes; I quite understand."

There was a short pause. Then Oliver asked: "Tell me, Maisie, why did n't you let them know before?"

Maisie opened her eyes wide, and raised herself up with an effort. "He never told his people. It was not his fault. He meant to, but he always put things off — and then he died — and they did n't believe — and I thought they would take Gay away from me — he was all I had!"

"But your own father and sister?"

"I could n't bear to go home. They had been so proud of me. I thought I could manage—and so I could"——

"But for Gay's sake it must all be set right with his father's people."

"Yes, yes; that is what I want — all proved. But Juliet must have Gay. I shall have little Do. She will always be mine." Another pause. Through the blue glass borders of the long, frosted windows Oliver could see the trees of the hospital garden, looking weird and unreal like trees in a dream.

From the other end of the ward a fretful child cried for "Mother! Mammy! take me into the garden where the trees are."

Maisie turned her head to listen and smiled. "It's Do!" she said. "Little Do wants me.—Yes, darling, Maisie's coming—we'll go out into the garden."

The watchful eyes of the nurse saw a blue shadow gathering round the lips that Oliver had not noticed in his eagerness to listen.

"Come away," she said hurriedly. "You'd better go where she can't see you. She's had so many turns like this," she added in a low tone as Oliver rose, "she might get over it again and rally up a bit. If you've anything very particular to say I'll call you when she's better."

As Oliver turned to go Maisie's eyes moved to a packet of papers on her pillow. He took them up, unfolding them as he walked down the ward.

A nurse at the door, noticing them, said, "It's against rules to take anything out that the pa-

tients have had. You can look at them here and leave them."

Oliver turned them over. "There may be things here of great importance that must not be destroyed. Can't they be disinfected? I can wait."

The nurse hesitated. "Well, I suppose they can be done if it's very urgent. I will take them down to the doctor. If it's all right you can have them back in half-an-hour. Shall you be able to wait?"

"Oh, I can wait;" and Oliver turned once more into the children's ward, where a cheerful group were gathered round the tea-table to discuss eggs and large plates of bread-andbutter.

Near the baby's cot under the tent he saw the anxious parents standing together, but his mind was so full of Maisie that he hardly felt interested in them now.

Presently there was a little stir at the door. A doctor had gone hastily into Andrew Ward; then a nurse came out hurriedly, and Oliver heard her say to another, "She's gone. I thought she would in one of those heart attacks. I thought she was going and sent over for Dr.

Miller, but it was all over before he came. Had n't she a friend waiting somewhere?"

Then they turned and saw Oliver standing in the doorway of the children's ward.

They had just drawn the screens round No. 45 bed, and there was a silence down the long row of beds, broken by the same child's voice again: "Take me into the garden, mammy; it's nice out there,"

CHAPTER XXI

COMFORTING GAY

After the toil, and suffering, and desire,
And patience, and the death in life long borne,
Who would recall her who hath flown up higher,
Beyond the good and pearly gates of dawn?—K. TYNAN.

S Oliver sorrowfully wended his way back to Parley Mansions that day after Maisie's death his heart was very full of little Gay; for what could Oliver do but open the door of his heart and take the forsaken child in, as he had opened the door of his flat that first night when he found the child on the stairs? The events of that first evening seemed a foreshadowing of what had happened now, as if a heavy door had been closed on little Gay, shutting him out from all he loved best. Little Do was sleeping the long sleep safe under angels' wings; Maisie gone too, her day's work done, out of the shadows of pain and wrong into the clear shining after rain where all things are explained.

One thing he had quite determined, and this was to make Gay understand what had happened. He was no longer a baby, and Oliver had a horror of deceiving children with unrealities. Death, after all, is God's messenger, and his face is fair and kind if only we look straight into it and do not shroud it with crape and sable plumes.

Oliver could look back, as indeed most of us can, to childish horrors caused by nursery warnings connected with the "pit-hole" and "bogy," or kitchen gossip in which awful words, such as "corpse candles" and "death watches" and "winding-sheets," &c., called up vague terrors, and he resolved that Gay should never have the same experience.

"I will tell him," he said resolutely to Mrs. Sims, who met him at the door with her apron to her eyes, sobbing that she "could n't a-bear the sight of that poor lamb playing away so innocent, and talking of his poor ma, bless his heart! and what he'd do when she come back."

So Oliver went into the room where Gay was sitting curled up in an arm-chair, a very sad, lonely little figure, with tumbled curls and flushed hot cheeks, wet with many tears, and young shoulders shaking and heaving with great sobs.

"Why, Gay, that's never you crying! I thought you were a big boy and going to help me.—I say, Mrs. Sims, this will never do, will it? This little chap will want a nurse to look after him and take him out in a perambulator, poor little fellow! And I suppose we shall have to look out for a big boy to help you and me with all we want him to do."

Oliver's brisk, sharp tone brought Gay to his feet at once, as all Mrs. Sims's coaxings and blandishments had failed to do.

"Oh! I was n't crying — at least, only just a very little, you know. You was so long coming back, and I thought you was n't coming back never at all — and — and " — Here came a swallow and an ominous catching of the breath.

"And — and — you wanted your tea as badly as I want mine. Come on, old chap; go and brush up, and look sharp about it or there won't be any bread-and-butter left for you. And after tea I want you to help me over in your flat. Now hurry up."

So after tea, which was not such a very doleful affair after all, they went over to the opposite flat and sat down on the large sofa where Maisie used to tell the children of home in the twilight.

The western sun came stealing in on the picture of what Gay had got to call "Do's garden."

A soft glow seemed to linger, too, round the picture of Maisie's sister, which somehow during the last fortnight had become an increasing subject of interest to Oliver. That evening he stood some time before it trying to forget in its fresh young beauty the sad disfigurement of the poor dving face he had been looking upon. And as he looked he realised that, striking as the likeness between the sisters was, there was a beauty in this face that Maisie could never have possessed, or had most certainly lost entirely. There was the same low, broad forehead, sensitive mouth, but the soft eyes were gray, and it was a spirit of joy and hope that looked out from them, a gentle, serene confidence, very unlike the stormy sorrow and passionate defiance that Death's cold hand had soothed to rest in Maisie.

Even as he sat there with Gay on his knee trying to nerve himself for his painful task, the sweet eyes smiled down on him and seemed to teach him what to say. To himself, indeed, his words sounded clumsy and bungling enough, and his voice shook once or twice, and he would have come to a standstill but for those gentle gray eyes looking down at him, and Gay's solemn blue eyes looking up and growing bigger and rounder as the story went on.

Oliver did not go in for sentiment, but simply tried to make the child understand the truth. Maisie was gone to be with little Do. They had been very ill, but God had called them, and now they were quite well and happy again.

"Does dying make people well?"

"Yes, quite well—all at once—better than any doctor can. Don't you remember, Gay, when Do and you had the measles? You were telling me about it the other day. You were a long time getting well."

"Yes; and it was n't nice at all. Do was so cross. And we had to leave off jelly and beeftea and all the nice things; and I told Maisie I'd rather be ill and stay in bed, and have her at home all day to tell us stories and make toast."

"Well, you see, Maisie and Do don't want toast or anything else now. They've got all they want."

"Does n't Maisie want me?" with a quivering lip.

Oliver felt he had made a slip. "Yes, of

course she does — very much indeed — and she and Do are looking out for you to come."

"When can I go? I should like to go now. May I, Chums?"

"No; not just yet. You see, you are a big boy — big enough for Maisie to trust you with me. And she wants you to learn a lot, and be a big, brave man, and do all kinds of things, and then you can tell them all about it when you get home. Won't there be a lot to tell?"

This was a cheering idea, and Gay remembered how much there would be to tell about the monkeys and lions at the Zoo; and would n't Do want to go there too?

Then came a shadow on the bright prospect. "Mrs. Sims said that Do was turned into an angel."

"Bother Mrs. Sims!" ejaculated Oliver inwardly. "I wish she would n't stuff up the child with what is n't true!" Then he was suddenly recalled by hearing Gay proceeding anxiously, "You know, I'm sure she'd fall off. She's such a little thing!"

"Fall off what?"

"Why, you know Do was only three, and she could n't run and jump like me. When we

played leap on the stairs she could only do two, and then I had to stand on the mat and hold her, and she always tumbled down. And I could jump four, and once I did five!"

It was some time before Oliver could solve the mystery of this difficulty, but ultimately he traced it to its source in an old illustrated Bible belonging to Mrs. Sims, whose pictures Gay had studied on Sunday afternoons when Oliver was asleep. In this was a picture of the Last Judgment wherein two angels were portrayed in the foreground, with very puffed-out cheeks, blowing long trumpets, and seated on very substantial clouds, with legs dangling in mid-heaven.

"I think Do would like a trumpet for a bit if it was like the one that the porter gave me at Christmas. I used to let her blow it sometimes, but she could n't do it as loud as me; and Maisie said it was an awful row and put it away."

"I don't fancy angels are always blowing trumpets," Oliver said; "at least I hope not. And perhaps Mrs. Sims doesn't know much about it. I don't think any one does."

"There's another angel in the picture what used to hang over Do's bed," Gay went on,

"but they 've taken it away. That was a pretty one with a little girl going along a path, and the angel holding her so that she should n't fall down a steep place where she was trying to catch a butterfly. But Do's not old enough to be an angel like that, you know; she's only a little girl herself, and I know she'd want to help catch the butterfly, and then they'd both fall down."

Oliver did not wish to cast a doubt on Mrs. Sims's knowledge of the life beyond the grave, and feeling profoundly ignorant and unsuggestive himself, he concluded the matter hastily by assuring Gay that, now Maisie was there to look after her, Do would be all right.

Anyhow, the truth had been told and the child's thoughts turned into a healthy, if rather speculative, channel; and Oliver hoped that the blessed forgetfulness of children might do the rest.

In the drawer in the writing-table Oliver found a thick packet directed to Miss Juliet Ross, Paston Grange, Byford, and other papers, among them a certificate of the marriage of Frampton Shirley and Margaret Ross at some obscure City church seven years ago. There was also a photograph of a young man in uniform, with a pleasant, good-looking face that somehow seemed familiar to Oliver—perhaps from its likeness to Gay, which was very marked. Oliver scrutinised that photograph curiously, fancying he could detect a weakness in the lines of the jaw, a shallow shiftiness in the laughing eyes, a want of generosity in the general effect. After a good deal of consideration he resolved not to deliver that letter, and with it Gay, till after the funeral. He did not feel clear on the subject of infection, and thought it would be better, on the whole, not to run the slightest risk, even if he had to bear reproach afterwards.

Maisie had left enough money to defray present expenses, and after consultation with the hospital authorities Oliver made his way to an undertaker's in Homerton recommended as doing funerals "comfortably" at a moderate expense.

"Yes, sir," said the wife of the gate-keeper, who undertook to point out Mr. Wallace's establishment to Oliver, "I think you'll find every satisfaction. Mr. Wallace is a very nice gentleman, and 'ave done most of the 'orspital

jobs this five years and more. Indeed, I may say as it was my doing 'is being took on, as was that kind when my poor dear first was took off sudden in fits, as was enjoying 'is Sunday dinner only two hours before, being always very partial to skirt and kidney pudding, and a 'earty eater. 'Mrs. Grinder,' says 'e - as was my name then - 'you leave it to me to do it reasonable, as 'ave known trouble myself and can feel with them in bereavement - all nice and quiet, and no pulling up at pubs, neither coming nor going, and no extra expenses, though in the case of a beloved 'usband velvets is generally thought a mark of respect, as is the last you can show 'em. Feathers, of course, depends on what the insurance runs to.' So after me and Mr. Jones made a match of it, as was always the best of friends with poor Grinder, we put in a word for Wallace with the committee, and got 'im took on instead of old Bunting, as put on the price shocking, and drank like a fish, and cheated my son's wife shameful over the twins, as did ought to have been reckoned as still-borns, pretty dears! and no bigger than midgets. You just mention to Mr. Wallace as you come from Mrs. Jones, sir; 'e never forgets a kindness, and I know if anything 'appened to Jones I should run to 'im at onst."

Oliver found that Mr. Wallace quite justified Mrs. Jones's description, being a very sleek, rosy little man, with a soft, soothing voice and habitually condoling manner. He evidently regarded Oliver as a likely customer for a really handsome and expensive function, and invited him to a confidential interview in the back-parlour behind the shop.

Oliver was glad to accept the invitation, as, no doubt with an eye to business, Mr. Wallace's work was transacted very much in public, and just now a throng of Board School children, just out for dinner, were gazing open-mouthed at the completion of a baby's coffin in white cloth, with much bepinked frilling inside.

"Oh, my lor', Sarah! ain't it 'andsome? Just like what the lady in our front-parlour 'ad 'er baby took away in and asted my mother to foller."

Oliver heard no more, but pushed through the half-door into the shop, and over a track of shavings and scraps of cloth and paper into a very stuffy back-parlour, adorned with memorial

cards and photographic views of tombstones and cemeteries.

"Our cards is very much liked," Mr. Wallace said, noticing that Oliver was studying some of the deeply bordered and highly embossed studies of funeral urns and weeping willows. "Those ain't our newest style. Fashions change even in our line, sir, and the gentry mostly fancies 'em in the silver line now, with just the name of the dear departed and a special 'ymn, such as 'Peace, perfick peace,' or—

"Say, cruel death, why 'ast thou dared To blight our fairest flower?

That's a very favourite one with a broken lily, you know."

Oliver felt in no mood for sentiment, and went so straight to business that when, twenty minutes later, he left Mr. Wallace with strict orders that neither feathers, velvets, nor mutes were to be supplied, and that everything was to be of the simplest description, that worthy man was fain to confess himself deceived, as Oliver "could n't have been the toff he took him for; most likely in trade hmself or he would n't have been so 'cute at paring down expenses,

and did n't look much as if the young person was deeply mourned."

Oliver had resolved not to take Gay to the funeral, still dreading the slightest risk for the child, and also shrinking from bringing before him the unavoidable dreary funeral pomp, though he had done his best to reduce it to its minimum.

So two days later he found himself slowly jogging along in a very large mourning-coach, preceded by poor Maisie's simple oak coffin in a glass hearse, under the charge of Mr. Wallace in a very shiny black coat and voluminous hatband. Oliver detested the present fashion of funeral wreaths with aggressive lilies and satin streamers and black-edged cards, and was inclined to agree with Mrs. Sims's disapproval of what she called "making a poppy-show of the dead."

But in their morning walk together he and Gay had stopped before a flower-basket in the street and selected from it a bunch of creamy roses with glossy red-brown leaves, just such as Maisie would have liked, and Gay kissed each of the flowers before Oliver took them to lay upon the coffin.

The cemetery where little Do had been laid, and where Oliver knew that Maisie would wish to lie too, is far away west from Homerton, so the slow progress thither took a considerable time. Kensal Green Cemetery is not without its attractions, and there are shady, quiet corners with grassy slopes and shadowy trees where birds make their nests and sing, in the spring-time, soft little songs of hope and expectation over the furrows cut by the ploughshare of death, where the poor seed is sown in dishonour, waiting for the glad springtime of the Resurrection when it will be raised in glory.

It was three weeks since Do's little grave had been made, and Oliver had greatly feared that the strong tide of death would have swept beyond and around it, leaving its high-water mark of newly turfed graves and withered flowers; but by some happy chance there was a space close by the small grave where Maisie could rest in peace beside her little girl.

Oliver felt soothed and comforted as he stood bareheaded looking down upon the coffin for the last time, reading the words, "Maisie, wife of Frampton Shirley, aged 29," half-hidden by the great soft roses Gay had kissed.

"In sure and certain hope," not because of the life of patient toil and suffering, not with heart's misgivings because of sin and weakness and imperfection, but in firm confidence in the great tender love of God, who knows all and, we trust, pardons all. *Tout savoir c'est tout* pardonner.

Oliver had dismissed the morning-coach, which went gaily back to Homerton at a good round trot, the horses' flowing tails having been tied up in knots, and the rusty velvet pall rolled up and tossed on the top of the hearse.

It was a fine afternoon and Oliver lingered half-curiously among the long rows of thickly-set graves, mostly adorned with cheap memorial stones and glass shades covering china flowers or bead wreaths, or with pickle-bottles sunk in the earth full of faded stocks and pinks. So many! so unutterably commonplace! yet each one of those thousands of poor graves could tell its own wonderful story of life and love, work and suffering, of infinite interest and importance to Him-whose eyes consider the poor and eyelids try the children of men.

CHAPTER XXII

BY THE SEA

To sit and watch the wavelets as they flow, Two - side by side; To see the gliding clouds that come and go, And mark them glide: We only, while around all weary grow, Unwearied stand, And, 'midst the fickle changes others know,

Love - hand and hand. - SULLY PRUDHOMME.

THE July days passed on one after another, and August was hard at hand, and still that letter to Paston Grange had not been delivered, and Gay was still at Parley Mansions.

When a thing has to be done very much against the grain, it is not difficult to find good and cogent reasons for putting off doing it, and on this occasion Mrs. Sims, who frequently was a powerful if somewhat irritating support to Oliver's infirm purposes, had played him false and, indeed, urged conclusive arguments against the return of Gay to his mother's relations - "Anyhow till the child's better. They won't think much of our care of him if he goes with that nasty little hecketty cough. And there's that set of night-shirts as I ain't nearly done; and I shouldn't like for him to go without his clothes being decent or they might think as we'd kep' some of them back, though goody knows his poor dear ma hadn't look after his things as she did oughter, and how should she?"

"To be sure!" said Oliver. "They might think I was wearing his night-shirts, and you his socks. One can't be too careful!"

"There, Master Oliver! you will have your jokes. But if you wants to turn the poor lamb out in such a hurry with hardly a shirt to his back, it ain't like you; and if you finds the child so much in your way it's every bit your own fault, as I can keep him along of me, and as good as gold when he ain't interfered with."

And then the child was ailing, and got a large-eyed, transparent look that fidgeted Oliver and made him inclined to shake Mrs. Sims when she shook her head and sighed ominously, just because he was disposed to do the same himself.

"There's nothing the matter with the child,"

he would protest. "It's only that the weather is hot and sultry, and this flat is enough to bake any one alive with the sun on the slates. Too good to live? Fiddlesticks! He had as good and healthy a fit of tantrums yesterday as any one could wish to see; and he polishes off that pile of bread-and-butter you cut for him with an appetite that doesn't look much like an invalid. If you think as badly of him as all that I'd better pack him off to-morrow to his grandfather, where he'll have country air and a garden to play in, which is just what he wants."

"And no one to see after him, I 'll be bound!" retorted Mrs. Sims; "getting his feet wet, and not having his meals reg'lar, and setting up later at nights than he does now, as is enough to make a child look holler-eyed and piney."

But this threat of sending Gay away made Mrs. Sims refrain from lugubrious remarks, and she agreed with alacrity when Oliver suggested that a breath of sea-air might do him good before he was introduced to his relations.

The question was where to go. Visions floated through Oliver's brain of Welsh mountains and Scotch moors, long stretches of royal

purple heather and golden gorse, clear brown rivers where silver trout leap and glitter, Cornish coasts where the wild waves rave against the iron strongholds of Tintagel or the Lizard. Yet one by one each was set aside as being unsuitable for Gay; and he noticed, too, when the subject was broached with Mrs. Sims, a certain undefined air of disapproval of any place he mentioned, which convinced him that she had some project in reserve, and he proved to be right.

"You see, Master Oliver," the old woman said one evening when she came in after putting Gay to bed, "the long and the short of it is, that child wants seeing to or we shall have him downright ill. I don't mean doctors or physicking, but plenty of fresh air and play and something fresh to think about. I believe that boy worrits and thinks a deal more than we knows, and I've seen him sitting up there, when you're out, looking more like an old man with all the care of the world on his shoulders than just the child with nothing to bother him as he did oughter look. It ain't likely he'll keep well long at this rate."

"Well, Biddy, I dare say you're right.

Where shall it be? I'm sure you've got something stowed away in your wise old head, so out with it!"

Mrs. Sims hesitated, pulled her apron, coughed, and then began half-bashfully: "I don't want you to think, Mr. Oliver, as I'm putting in one word for Master Gay and two for myself, as the saying is, but it did come into my 'ead as my pore 'usband's youngest sister, Martha, married one of them coastguards down at Blessingtonon-Sea, I think it 's called. She 've ast me many a time to go down to 'em. It's a nice little place, too, seemingly, and a rare place for children; none of your smart, stuck-up places with big hotels and 'lectric cars, and ladies strutting up and down to a band. Not as it's dull neither, Martha says, as has a nice little pier, and a deal of boating in the fishing-time; and now and again gents' yachts comes in, and parties often come over from Scarmouth and Coastgate for picnics and such, as is a sweet, pretty country inland."

The description sounded mildly attractive, and, as Mrs. Sims talked, Oliver noticed that she too looked a bit jaded and used-up, as if a breath of sea-air would do her good. What a selfish

fellow he had been to leave her out of his calculations! And what would Gay have done without her? For, of course, the child wanted mothering, and with all the tenderness in the world a man cannot quite compass that. So he said:

"Right you are, Biddy. We'll turn the key on this stuffy old place and just make off there to-morrow, you and Gay and I. So just you send a line to Mrs. Martha and tell her to get us a shake-down. Coastguard, did you say? Oh, I know! lives in an old boat turned up on end, perched up on the rocks, where you can catch lobsters out of the bedroom window."

Mrs. Sims flushed with pleasure at the proposal of what had been really in her heart all the time, though she was not altogether satisfied at Oliver's hasty sketch of her sister-in-law's establishment.

"Begging your pardon, Master Oliver, it ain't no such thing, as I would n't have thought of putting Master Gay into no old boats, nor you neither. Martha married very comfortable, and Mr. Ball's the headman on the coastguard station there, and been there this thirty year and more, and 'ighly respected. They did use to

live up near the station, it's true, though it was n't no old boats then; but Martha was always a active body, and 'aving no fam'ly, took to apartments—more for company like, at first—and did so well as people come year after year, saying as she made 'em so comfortable. So after a bit they moved down to the Terrace—Bellevue Terrace—a nice, tidy little 'ouse, just big enough to take one set and live comfortable theirselves, as John Ball's not a man to be easy put out."

For the next half-hour Mrs. Sims continued to enlarge on the charms of Blessington in general and No. 4 Bellevue in particular, and Oliver retired to bed exhausted but resigned, feeling that it was all for the best, and that if Mrs. Sims were satisfied nothing else mattered much.

Fortunately Mrs. Ball's rooms proved to be disengaged, owing to some lodgers having to leave before they expected; and before the week was over the party found themselves established in what appeared heaven on earth to Gay and a rather poky little lodging-house to Oliver.

As to Mrs. Sims, she was simply swelling with pride and satisfaction in the double dignity of showing off Mrs. Ball's merits to Oliver, and

the grandeur of "my young gents from London" to Mrs. Ball.

Blessington, however, proved to be just what was wanted - a little, old-fashioned fishing-village, with a cluster of red-tiled houses sheltering snugly under brown cliffs, with a straggling, roughly paved street running down to the small quay and rough shingle beach, where fishingboats were drawn up, and big black nets spread out to dry, and the men lounged and smoked. and watched far-off passing vessels through their glasses, and gossiped of great hauls of whiting and mackerel, or stormy nights and perils at sea. When the tide was low the sea left bare a good stretch of firm yellow sand, with low, seaweed-covered rocks, in whose deep pools sea-anemones spread wonderful red and purple flowers, and tiny crabs and shadowy shrimps were to be found.

Gay's indisposition soon vanished in the strong, salt sea-breezes. What a big man he felt going out with Oliver in the early morning, with a towel round his neck, to a sequestered creek in the rocks for a plunge in the fresh, green, tossing waves; coming back with wet curls, glowing cheeks, and sandy toes, to breakfast off great

slices of sweet country bread, spread thick with clotted cream, and deep draughts of new milk; and then out again to spend the rest of the morning in a sort of amphibious condition, half in the sea and half on shore, building mighty sand castles with moat and bastion, to be swept away in five minutes by the dancing, sparkling waters. Sometimes Oliver would join in these elaborate entrenchments, and sometimes sit and smoke under the shadow of a boat and chat with the fishermen till Gay, quite worn out with his exertions, would fling himself down beside him, a regular sea-urchin, as Oliver said, with firm, round, sunburnt limbs all stained with sand and seaweed, and a face so gloriously red that Mr. Ball used to declare "as how he did n't know afore as lobsters come out of the sea ready biled!"

Mrs. Sims spent most of her time in the back-parlour with Martha, assisting in household matters, and deep in Blessington gossip. Occasionally she would array herself in a broadbrimmed hat and very large white cotton gloves, and take up her abode near the bathing-machines, under a brown holland parasol; and once or twice Oliver induced her to take a drive in

what she called a "charry-bang;" but as a rule Martha's companionship and the scenery of the back-parlour seemed all-sufficient.

So the days drifted along till the end of August pleasantly enough, though disturbed now and then by pangs of conscience on Oliver's part as to his duty towards Gay's relatives; which he always quieted by the resolve that when they got back to London he would take the matter in hand at once.

One morning towards the end of their stay a telegram arrived for Oliver from an old college friend asking him to join him and his wife at Scarmouth, and have a day's cruise along the coast in their yacht.

At first Oliver was inclined to decline, feeling somehow as if he grudged to spare a single day of the few remaining with little Gay; but that very morning Mr. Ball sent in word to know if he might take the young gentleman up to the coastguard station, and show him the big telescope and the old cannon and the subterranean passage where the smugglers used to stow away their kegs of whisky and other contraband goods.

Gay was wild with delight at the prospect, and

as he would be so blissfully occupied, Oliver reflected that a good blow at sea sounded very refreshing, and that he had not seen his old chum for years, and that he might as well follow Mrs. Sims's advice on hearing of the invitation—"Take and go."

It was a pleasant day and did Oliver real good, the pretty little yacht skimming over the bright waters just within sight of land, with fishing-villages nestling in sheltered coves, and brown-sailed fishing-boats putting out, and white-winged sea-birds whirling and screaming round sharp rocky headlands, and the clear green water lapping against the sides of the yacht as it sped along.

It was a real refreshment to talk over old days and laugh once more over old 'varsity jokes, which are so much better than the feeble wit of the present day, and to recall the time when he and Jack Dasent were jolly young undergrads, strolling down the High or pulling together in the college eight. Little Mrs. Jack, too, was as pretty and pleasant a wife as a man need wish for, and when Oliver turned in for the night he found himself actually envying Jack Dasent's but somehow or other it was not Carrie Dasent's

blue eyes and smooth dark hair that haunted his dreams, but soft grey eyes that seemed to smile at him out of a picture-frame from below a crown of shining bronze hair.

"Hullo, Gay! No need to ask if you're all right," he said next morning, as he walked into No. 4 Bellevue, feeling just a trifle anxious how he should find that the boy had fared in his absence.

His anxiety proved to be quite unnecessary, for Gay was overflowing with eagerness to describe all his adventures, and Mrs. Sims seemed almost equally excited, and anxious to prove to Oliver how very little he had been missed, and how much less important he was than he fondly imagined, while Mr. Ball rested his arms on the ledge outside the parlour window and pulled away placidly at his pipe, with an occasional remark interposed between the cross-fire of words going on within.

For some minutes Oliver sat listening in hopeless bewilderment. "Hold hard a minute, Gay; you get on too fast for my old brains, you know. Let's see. You fired off the big gun first, and blew up the old gentleman; and then Mr. Ball looked through the long glass to see

what had become of him, and there he was stuck in a lobster-pot. Go on; what next?"

"No, I did n't shoot the big gun; and it was n't a lobster-pot he was in, but a beautiful big yacht with white sails and a Union-jack on the mast—just like the boats in Kensington Gardens—and such nice sailors, all in blue jackets, you know, and caps with—— What was it on the caps, Mr. Ball?"

"Nora Creina," gruffly from outside the window.

"Yes, Nora Creina on their caps. And one of them was quite a little boy, not much bigger than me, and he could climb up the ropes and do all sorts of things, and did n't seem a bit afraid. Oh, I should like to be a sailor. May I, Chums? And then, you know, the old gentleman what the yacht belongs to took us downstairs into such a beautiful room — cabin, I mean — just like a palace, with velvet cushions and looking-glasses; and he gave me such a big bit of pineapple, and some sponge-cakes, and a lot of plums. And when we came away he gave me this to buy a boat with" — and Gay mysteriously produced half-a-sovereign carefully wrapped up in the corner of a very sandy little

pocket-handkerchief — "and I'm going to call it the *Nora Creina*, and Mr. Ball's going to rig it for me."

"Hullo, Mrs. Sims! I should collar that if I were you, or he'll be playing ducks and drakes with it. Who was this jolly old Crœsus, I wonder? And how did you manage to get round him, you young wheedler?"

"Well, Master Oliver," broke in Mrs. Sims, "it's the strangest thing I've seen for a long time. Ball had brought Master Gay down from the station to the quay along with him, as this 'ere Sir John — whoever he may be — had signalled up to the station as he come along. — Was n't that it, Mr. Ball?"

"Well, you see, sir" — Ball took up the tale deliberately between long whiffs of his pipe — "Sir John's been up and down here this ten year and more, and most years he've put in for a bit, having a liking for the place seemings. We always look out for the Nora Creina about this time, as is a tidy little craft enough, though getting a bit old-fashioned now, I take it. But, you see, Sir John's an old-fashioned gent hisself. And when his old skipper died he took on a young chap as I knew man and boy this twenty

year - and a smart chap, too - and he's been with him ever since. So when they puts in here Tom mostly signals to me, and we have a bit of a yarn together; and so does the master, too, for that matter."

"But tell Mr. Oliver how he took on with Master Gay," broke in Mrs. Sims, who, like most discursive talkers, was very impatient of digressions in other people. "He seemed reg'lar took up with the child, did n't he, Mr. Ball?"

"Well, yes, so he did. As I was a-telling Mrs. Sims here, he's a jolly old gent is Sir John, and wonderful partial to children; and Master Gay being 'long of me, and looking about so peart-like, and asking questions about this, that, and the other, you see, he took notice on him and asked if he'd like to see the yacht. And when they come back after going round her he seemed reg'lar took up with the young master, and asked a mort of questions - 'What's 'is name?' and 'Where do 'e come from?' - more'n I could answer. And when Master Gay says as his name would be Frampton — 'Frampton?' says Sir John. 'Well, I'm blowed if it ain't the strangest thing out!' And he called another gent on



But tell Mr Oliver how he took on with Master Gay,' broke in Mrs Sims.



board to come and look at him, and he put his 'and under Master Gay's chin and turned up his face, and 'e looked and looked as if 'e were in a puzzle and could n't get to the bottom of it."

Oliver was getting interested. "Who did you say the old fellow is? Sir John"—

"Sir John Shirley, sir. A very good old fam'ly, as I'm told, and has a fine place somewheres in the Midlands. He only comes about here for the yachting, you see, so I don't know much of him except for that."

"Has he any family?"

"Yes; I mind one son of his who used to come along with him, but I've heard tell as he give the old gent a deal of trouble afore he died out in the Indies. And there's another, Tom says, but he don't care for the sea, and lives mostly in London or abroad."

Oliver listened absently to further descriptions of the glories of the *Nora Creina* and her master, and all Gay's other exploits during his absence.

The name of Shirley struck strangely on his ear, and set him pondering if this chance meeting might not have a decided influence on the

future of little Gay — if this should indeed prove to be the child's grandfather.

The next day Mrs. Ball brought him the week's number of the Scarmouth Gazette, just out.

"I thought you might like to see this, sir," she said, "seeing as you was talking to Ball about the old gentleman yesterday;" and she pointed to a passage in the column headed "Society Doings":

"A marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between Ralph, only surviving son of Sir John Shirley, Bart., of Shirley Hall, Midlandshire, and Doris, only daughter of Colonel Mostyn, Eldon Crescent, Notting Hill,

"The above announcement may interest some of our readers, to whom Sir John Shirley's yacht, the *Nora Creina*, is well known."

CHAPTER XXIII

HOME

Fenced with old box, and quaint and neat Wells of sweet in the greensward. . . . Here are pansy and gillyflowers, Mignonette and the marigold; Here the butterflies flit in showers; Here is the brown bee overbold. — K. Tynan.

CLEAR, bright September day, with that crisp, fresh autumn feeling in the air that is so inspiriting, with a smell of mushrooms from the meadows, where the heavy morning dew has set the cobwebs on the hedges thick with diamonds, over the jet of the ripe blackberries and the crimson and gold of the bramble-leaves. Talk of coronation robes! Why, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

"Here we are!" Oliver said as he lifted Gay out of the train at Byford Station.

As we have seen, various causes had combined to put off this eventful day, till now it was the second week in September, nearly two months since Maisie's death.

But now all possible and impossible reasons for delay were exhausted. Gay had come back from Blessington sunburnt and rosy and brighteyed, and dismissed all fears of his being too good to live by occasional very reassuring fits of naughtiness. The little night-shirts were finished to the last button-hole and row of stitching, and had been washed and folded in the drawer with other small garments all ready. It was in vain that the old woman suggested specious excuses for further delay, into which Oliver was ashamed to be beguiled, though he would only too willingly have listened to the voice of the charmer.

For it had begun to be a very serious question with him how he should get on without the boy—without the curly head burrowed so deep into the pillow of the small bed made up on the sofa in his room, without the soft breathing so pleasant to hear when he woke in the night, and the brisk little voice that inquired, "Are you asleep, Chums?" at unearthly hours of the morning, followed by a quick scuttle of small bare feet across the room and a climb up into his bed; to have to sit down to his solitary meals without the fresh little face opposite; to

have uninterrupted hours for writing and study with no small plague to jog his elbow, or upset the ink, or disarrange his papers; to take his walks abroad wherever inclination led him, without a decided and overruling bias to the Zoo or the pond in Kensington Gardens; to revert to more highly seasoned food after the course of nursery diet to which circumstances had condemned him of late; to return, in short, to the quiet and serene solitude which he had esteemed such a boon in the first weeks of his residence in Parley Mansions.

It did not do to think of the silence that would fall heavily on the flat when no gay little voice sounded about the place; it was like imagining the spring without the birds, and, if Mrs. Sims had not been so openly dismal at the prospect, Oliver might have given way to his own reluctance. But to hear continual sniffing going on, and to catch sight of surreptitious tears wiped away with the corner of an apron, and, moreover, to discover that she was communicating some of her feelings to little Gay, strengthened Oliver's resolution as nothing else could have done.

The culminating point was reached when one

night Gay threw throttling arms round Oliver's neck, and declared he "didn't want to go to Do's garden—he didn't! he didn't!"

Oliver had to disengage those clinging arms—often in after days he thought he could feel the pleasant pain of that warm young grasp—and talk with much matter-of-fact cheerfulness of the life in the new home to which he and Gay were going the very next day, and of what a lucky little boy he was to be going to such a place, and of all the delights of that garden.

I think it was then that squirrels were introduced, which proved to be a very consoling addition to the prospect, though Gay had a very upsetting way, after each triumph of Oliver's imagination in depicting the pleasures in store for him, of clasping warm little hands round Oliver's and adding, "You too!"

Oliver went straight to Mrs. Sims directly the child was asleep and bid her pack Gay's things that very night, as they were to make an early start next morning, and he invented a train on the spur of the moment by which they were to travel, to give the effect of the whole plan having been carefully prearranged. "And for

goodness' sake," he said, "don't turn on the waterworks! If you set the child off I shall have a regular piece of work with him to-morrow, and I've done my best to put a good face on it for his sake. Come, Biddy!" he said, for the old woman's face was beginning to crumple and quiver; "I expect we're feeling much the same about it, so we shall have to console one another when the little beggar's gone. By Jove! I believe you would rather part with me than with him, you fickle old woman!"

I think those small night-shirts must have required a thorough airing before Gay could safely have worn them, so bedewed were they with the tears that fell in the course of packing; but Mrs. Sims did her best next morning to present a cheerful face, though her efforts were not crowned with much success, as Gay followed the contortions of her countenance with big eyes of concern and interest.

Oliver had to discover that the imaginary train started somewhat earlier than he had thought, and to start off in a prodigious hurry that allowed of no prolonged partings; and Gay was too much interested in climbing into a hansom, and seeing his trunk hoisted to the roof of that vehicle, to do more than kiss a fat hand to the melancholy-looking object who had followed them down the stairs and stood sobbing into her apron at the door.

The journey down was full of amusement to Gay, not spoilt, as in Oliver's case, with the feeling that this was probably their last expedition together; and when they reached Byford, and Gay reluctantly parted with an endearing kitten that a fellow-passenger had in a basket, Oliver too felt that he would have liked the journey prolonged in order to postpone another separation from a much more endearing young thing, a parting which every moment and step brought nearer.

For this cause also he decided on walking, though the porter at the station told him that the Grange was hard upon three miles from Byford, and there was a mouldy fly to be had; and he left the trunk to be fetched subsequently, with half a hope that it might, owing to some unforeseen circumstance, have to travel back by the way it came.

He felt it was cowardly to put off the evil moment of parting, and three miles was a long walk for short legs — "But it's all across fields, and we can sit down a bit now and then, and I can carry him if he gets tired."

So, armed with a bag of buns for refreshment on the way, they set off across the fields - broad, golden stubble-fields with little pink convolvuli and scarlet poppies and corn-marigolds scattered about over the broad furrows where the rich bronze gold of the corn had waved not long ago, and where already in parts the ploughshare was turning up sweet-smelling earth, with the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed. There were turnip-fields, the broad leaves spangled yet with the heavy dew, though the heat was twinkling over the path. A covey of partridges flew up with a whir that startled Gay, and dropped in the stubble beyond the hedge. There were meadows with grazing cattle, at sight of which Gay thought he was a little tired, and agreed to having a lift on Oliver's shoulder; and there were deep lanes with blackberries thick and ripe on the hedges, which again made Oliver's shoulder a desirable position, and produced disastrous effects on lips and fingers. Then they came to a softly flowing river with willows dipping branches into it, and water-lilies rising and falling on its slow current,

turning up now and then the red linings of their great broad leaves when the wind ruffled them, like ladies anxious to display a smart petticoat. Among the rushes along the banks were forget-me-nots, and almond-scented meadow-sweet, and purple loosestrife, and great showy clumps of yellow ragwort.

This was a good opportunity to wash off the blackberry stains, and they bivouacked here and ate buns and watched gay, shadowy little fish flit hither and thither in the shallow water; and Gay had a nap with his head on Oliver's arm, who sat with his back against a crooked willow split down the middle with ferns growing inside it. Bright-eyed little birds came and peeped at them, and water-rats swam across the stream. leaving a widening furrow behind them, with the intention of landing on what was generally their peculiar domain, and, on a movement from Oliver, plopped back into the water and dived out of sight, scattering the shoals of little fish like silver sparks in every direction; and once a kingfisher flashed past, all green and shining blue in the sunshine of that halcyon day.

But the reader will think I am as loath to separate these two chums as Oliver was (and I

think perhaps I am), so I will linger no further over the details of that walk, which reminded Oliver of that sad journey of Abraham with his son — his only son, Isaac, whom he loved — most pathetic of all stories, when "they went both of them together." What a world of pathos in those words, "both of them together"!

So, now that Gay has woke up, and Oliver has pulled himself up to his feet, we will delay no longer, but go on along the shady bit of road leading to the Grange, to the white gate where Oliver will not allow himself to hesitate, but pushes it open and, with Gay's hand in his, goes up the drive.

There are big lime-trees, touched here and there with yellow, that shut out the house from view, but at a turn in the drive Oliver suddenly stopped and felt the small hand in his give a start.

Before them was the fac-simile of the picture that had hung in the flat opposite Oliver's—the picture that Gay had told him was home and little Do had fancied was heaven.

The old-fashioned, rambling house smiled its pleasant, friendly welcome as it had done in the picture; for houses have expressions quite as much as, if not more than, human faces. Only, in place of the wreaths of white clematis that festooned the bow-window in the picture, roses bloomed and clustered. The French windows stood open, leading out on to the soft mossy turf which spread away under the great horse-chestnut tree, no longer in its spring array of milk-white tapers, but spreading great golden fans, making sunlight against the solemn bluegreen stone-pine behind.

Over the laurel hedge to the right showed the apple-tree, no longer, indeed, clothed with its fairy pink and white, but with golden, rosycheeked apples, very goodly to the eyes. There, through the nut-bushes and under the limes, the mossy path led away, and, from the direction in which Gay's fat finger had often indicated that the poultry-yard lay, a vociferous rooster was proclaiming with shrill clarion note that he was master of all he surveyed; and the low "moo" of a cow brought to Oliver's remembrance the names of Sweetlips and Pretty Maid, and the children's indignation at his suggestion that such were the names of pigs.

It seemed as if he might be standing in the flat where the silence of death brooded, and looking at the picture which Maisie had called the nicest home in the world, and as if on turning his head he would see the other picture smiling down at him with those clear, fearless eyes and brow unclouded by the sorrow and pain that had stamped such indelible marks on poor Maisie's face.

Gay, too, was standing spellbound, with his breath coming quick and a strange sort of wondering, puzzled look on his face.

"Well, Gay," Oliver asked, "do you see where you are?"

The child drew a long breath, and his hold tightened on Oliver's hand as it had done when Oliver had taken him to St. Paul's, and the organ had suddenly pealed out, and Gay had looked up into the great dim dome with the mosaics shining in grand mysterious forms.

"It is Do's garden!" he said in a low, awestruck voice; for, with all Oliver's efforts to discriminate, Gay had mixed up the earthly and the heavenly home, and to the boldest or the best of us it would be an awe-inspiring thing if we stepped suddenly from earth's dusty high-road into the fair gardens of Paradise.

And then up the mossy path under the lime-

trees, where Oliver had dreamt once of seeing the great angel with the flaming sword leading little Do, came a tall, slight figure on whose white dress and soft, uncovered ruddy hair the sunlight through the foliage overhead fell in warm splashes and flakes, and who looked at Oliver and the child with the smiling, clear eyes that were so familiar to them both and yet that neither had seen before.

And then Gay, with a glad cry of recognition, "Maisie! Maisie!" caught his hand away from Oliver's hold, and ran with outstretched hands across the sunny grass in the old tumultuous, reckless fashion that Maisie had known and loved so well, ending in a flying leap to clasp his arms round her neck, and, failing that, to fold them round her waist and hide his face on her breast.



And then Gay, with a glad cry of recognition, . . . ran with outstretched hands across the sunny grass.



CHAPTER XXIV

"YOU AND ME"

Let's go up to the pig-sties, and sit on the farmyard rails! Let's say things to the bunnies, and watch'em skitter their tails! Let's—oh! anything, daddy, so long as it's you and me, And going truly exploring, and not being in till tea.

- RUDYARD KIPLING.

It might have been Maisie's voice speaking—and they were the very words she had said when she came to take her farewell look at Gay before her sad vigil by little Do, preparatory to her own removal to the hospital. Now, in the dim twilight of the room where Oliver sat by Gay's bedside, it might have been Maisie herself standing at the door, or Maisie's spirit come back for another look at her child.

If Maisie's spirit indeed lingered about her old home to watch the meeting between Gay and his relations, I am afraid his behaviour must have ruffled the serenity even of one beyond the frets and jars of this troublesome life; for, I am sorry to say, Gay had done his very utmost to disgust his newly found relations with him, and had been behaving simply abominably. Oliver was quite sure that if his first experience of Gay had been the same as theirs he should certainly have hesitated before admitting him to his hearth and home.

This behaviour began directly he found out that it was not Maisie whom he was clutching so tightly, in royal disregard of crumpled dress and disordered lace; although, in spite of the surprise that such a sudden and unexpected embrace must have produced, her arms folded round her small assailant with a tenderness that did not fall far short of that of his mother. I think it was more the sense of touch that revealed the difference than that of sight or sound -a sort of magnetic thrill of a mother's touch that is unmistakable — but directly he realised that it was not Maisie he was possessed with a fury more of anger than sorrow. There was even a movement as if he would have struck at the gentle face bending down to him with such a wondering smile, and he tore himself roughly away from her arms and flung himself face downwards on the turf, and - I am afraid I must use the word with which Mrs. Sims was wont in old days to designate Oliver's manifestations of temper, though she did not apply it to Gay's — he simply "bellowed," and Oliver and Juliet stood gazing at one another across his prostrate body in much embarrassment.

"He thought you were his mother," Oliver said in extenuation.

"Maisie?" Juliet asked. "What! Maisie?" He bowed his head, and Oliver saw her eyes quickly turn to the black band that Mrs. Sims had stitched on the sleeve of Gay's sailor-suit, and then look up inquiringly at him, and again he bowed his head.

He saw the colour blench a little in her cheek, and the tender lines of her mouth quiver, making her look strangely like the dead sister.

"She asked me to bring the boy to you," he said, his voice hardly audible through the hideous noise Gay was making; and then, in answer to an inquiring look in her eyes, he added, "I was her friend."

"You will tell me about it presently," she said. "Let us comfort him first. Shall I go away? Of course, it was terrible to him if he thought I was Maisie."

But the time for explanation had not come till now that Gay was asleep, for though Oliver quieted the bellowing, and pacified the child so that he began to take a little interest in his surroundings, and was well content to sit on Oliver's knee under the chestnut-tree, still, directly Juliet showed herself at the window or came out into the garden, Gay closed his eyes firmly, and held on as it were for dear life to Oliver's coat.

It was in vain that Juliet, with a little soft call, brought half-a-dozen white pigeons from the stable roof, who settled on her shoulder, and ate out of her hand, and nestled soft, warm heads against her cheek. Gay hid his face persistently in Oliver's coat, and when that was withdrawn, shut his eyes.

It was equally useless when Oliver detected a squirrel sitting up on the branch of a fir-tree eating a nut. Juliet was standing near, so Gay doggedly refused to look round; and when tea was brought out, with a dish of velvety peaches, Gay would have none of them, and only consented to take a surreptitious bite of Oliver's bread-and-butter, for all the world as if he might be supping with the Borgia,

and Juliet might have deep designs of poisoning him.

Altogether he was as naughty and tiresome as possible, and as unlike the brave little chap who had promised his mother to be a good boy and not cry, and who had loyally carried out his promise; and if Oliver had not been so desperately sorry for him and fond of him, he would have liked to give him a good smacking.

"I suppose Mrs. Sims and I have been spoiling him," Oliver thought. "It is so suicidal as regards his future prospects. I am sure it would be no wonder if they altogether declined to have anything to do with such a tiresome brat."

Things took a somewhat more hopeful appearance when a Dandie Dinmont suddenly appeared on the scene, coming out of the house in the most business-like and intentional manner on very short and crooked legs, and with a large face expressive of all the wisdom of the ages, and went straight to Gay, who was ensconced on the grass behind Oliver's chair, within easy grasping distance of his coat, and entirely concealed from the gentle-faced Borgia at the teatable.

Bobs pushed a very large, damp black nose

against Gay's cheek, who, being unused to dogs, rather gasped at finding himself at such close quarters with one, and at a further demonstration of a large red tongue in a hasty caress; and then Bobs reared himself into a begging position in front of his small new friend, who, he at once realised, might be a substantial addition to his feeders at afternoon tea, superior to casual adults, who regard bread-and-butter as a very intermittent and occasional article of food.

Gay could not resist sharing a bit of breadand-butter with Bobs, and Oliver heard, to his great satisfaction, a little chuckling laugh behind him—a mere ghost of Gay's usual infectious laugh, but still something to be thankful for from the morose, scowling little person he had introduced to his relations.

Oliver had fully intended, after depositing Gay with his relations, to make his way back to the station and catch some evening train to London. Indeed, he had told Mrs. Sims that he should certainly be home that night.

He had reckoned that perhaps there might be a little difficulty when it came to saying goodbye to Gay, and he had planned, if possible, to slip away without any formal leave-taking. But he had calculated on Gay being in his usual happy, friendly condition, surrounded by admiring relatives, and full of delight and interest in everything, and had assured himself that, after the first pang was over, the child would soon be quite happy in his new surroundings, and forget all about him long before time had deadened the soreness and emptiness in Oliver's own heart.

Juliet, however, looked imploringly at him when he said something about the train; and Gay, who caught the meaning of what passed though Bobs had lured him from Oliver's side farther than he had ventured since their arrival, at once returned to his entrenchment, and took such a firm hold of Oliver's coat as would have required main force to escape from. So Oliver, with a thought of compunction for poor, lonely old Biddy, agreed to telegraph that he would not return that night; and a man was despatched to Byford to send the message off, and to bring back Gay's trunk and Oliver's bag, which he had luckily brought in case of emergencies.

Gay would not have been averse to explore the undiscovered country, which yet was so strangely familiar to him, if he and Oliver might have done it hand in hand without the disturbing element of Juliet: to go along paths which had hitherto ended with the pictureframe; to investigate apples which really grew on a tree, and were not heaped in baskets or set out in twopenny lots; to follow the white pigeons when they disappeared round the house, and to interview the cock who kept on so vociferously inviting a visit. Indeed, when Bobs waddled off into the back-garden with evidently serious intentions of amusing himself, with a sidelong look at Gay, plainly inviting him to join him, Gay's naughtiness almost melted away, and Oliver greatly hoped that the sun would come out from behind the clouds and the child display himself in his natural colours.

But a wistful little overture from Juliet made him relapse into his corner by Oliver and his surly naughtiness, and he persisted in his bad behaviour till the arrival of the luggage, when he cordially agreed to Oliver's proposal that they should go up and unpack, though he rather demurred to the further suggestion that bed was the best place for small boys who could not behave themselves.

"Father will be coming home soon," Juliet

told him. "He has been in Medington all day. I wish" —— She hesitated and looked at Gay—at any rate at the back of Gay's head, for his face was turned away as usual.

"Yes," said Oliver, "I know. I'll give Gay a good talking to. You can't imagine how utterly unlike him this is. I think he must be possessed."

He knew that she was anxious that the first impression on his grandfather should be favourable, and as soon as the bedroom door was closed he addressed himself to the task of delivering a solemn exhortation to the young culprit.

Culprit? He was gone, vanished completely, and it was Gay who frisked across the room with the old sunshiny face and bright laughing eyes.

How could any one lecture a creature like that, who clasped both arms round Oliver's leg, and rested his chin on Oliver's knee, and looked up with that dimpling smile that Oliver found so very irresistible?

"Oh Gay," Oliver said weakly, "how could you be such a naughty little boy?"

"Good now," Gay announced cheerfully. "And there's a robin outside the window. Do

you think if we kept very, very still we might catch it and take it home with us?"

"This is home," Oliver said, preparing himself for a renewed outbreak; but, to his surprise, Gay beamed on him with the greatest satisfaction.

"Then you and me and Mrs. Sims will always live here; and this is you and me's bedroom. And I think Bobs would like to come and sleep here too. And that shall be our very own robin, and we'll feed it every morning."

How was it possible to scold any one whose idea of home was just "you and me"—an idea that must needs be shattered the very next day?

But Oliver delivered his conscience as best he could by haranguing Gay, who listened rather intermittently, buttoning and unbuttoning Oliver's waistcoat, and sticking a withered forget-me-not into various button-holes, and interrupting occasionally with very irrelevant remarks about Bobs and the robin and a hairy caterpillar he had discovered.

Oliver made a mistake, and introduced too comic an element into the business, by picturing to Gay how it would have looked if he himself had lain on the grass and roared, or shut his eyes and shrugged up one shoulder, whenever a lady spoke to him.

"Like this," Gay said, illustrating the operation; and Oliver felt quite ashamed to think what Juliet would think of the peals of laughter that ensued, and the caperings of feet about the room as Gay assisted in the unpacking and explored "you and me's" bedroom.

It was a large, low room, with a big bowwindow looking out on to the lawn, and the chestnut-tree made perpetual sunshine there with its golden leaves. It seemed spacious after the more confined quarters of the flat, and was furnished in that pleasant old-fashioned way, with articles of various dates and proportions and values, that make up a harmonious homely whole, not arrived at by the elegant bedroom suites of maple-wood and high-art cretonne. A very large dimity-covered arm-chair by the side of the bed, with many soft cushions, suggested ideas of pleasant convalescence from illness such as none of those elaborate invalid furniture depôts could supply. Gay was particularly pleased with this chair, and if a very attractive little crib had not been prepared for him on the other

side of the bed, would have been well content to sleep there. Indeed, he nearly dropped off to sleep in it while Oliver was debating whether he could not present this transformed Gay to his relations.

But the journey and the long walk and the agitation and the naughtiness had combined to tire the child, and it was a very drowsy little person that Oliver's unskilful hands undressed in rather a fumbling way, and dreamy and indistinct prayers that were said, with an irrelevant allusion to Bobs coming after the "Amen," and a curly head dropped against Oliver's shoulder as he lifted him into bed.

Then Oliver sat for a bit by the child's crib watching the softly fading light, and a trail of pink-tinted clouds that the sun had left as he went to his gorgeous rest, growing pale before the coming night, though the chestnut did its best to keep back the sunshine in its golden leaves, and the stems of the pine-trees had caught the crimson from the sunset. A bat flickered past the window, and Oliver could hear the purr of the night-jar, most likely at some distance, as it is a sound that travels curiously far, and he listened to its occasional drop of half a tone.

And then a large soft star looked through the branches, and seemed to have suddenly called out half-a-dozen others that had been invisible a moment before.

And then came Maisie's voice at the door, "Is the boy asleep?" and Juliet came into the room, followed by her father.

He was a tall old man, with a stoop in his shoulders and a patient, gentle effect in his movements. And that was all Oliver could see of him in the dim light as he came softly in and stood by the crib where his grandchild lay asleep, and Juliet drew her arm through his in a protecting, tender way as if he needed support.

"This is Mr. Bruce, father," Juliet said; and Oliver knew that they had been reading Maisie's letter, written that last sad night, which he had handed to Juliet on his arrival, and that his name had been mentioned there.

The two men shook hands across Gay's sleeping figure, as Juliet and Oliver had made their first acquaintance across him as he kicked and roared.

"You'd like to see him?" Oliver said. "He's sound asleep now. You can't think how sorry I

am he should have been so naughty. I can't imagine what possessed him."

"Oh, don't wake him!"

The old man's nursery recollections were distant, and too dim for him to remember how deep children travel into dreamland, and he spoke almost in a whisper, and would have restrained Oliver from striking a light, but he, with the superior knowledge acquired in the last few weeks, held a lighted candle full over the sleeping child without fear of awaking him.

The light shone, too, on the old man—a gentle, kindly old face, with lines of patient sorrow about the mouth, and with mild eyes peering from under tufted gray eyebrows—and on Juliet's sweet face, more like Maisie's now that there were tears on the long lashes, which the reading of that letter had pressed out of the brave, unselfish heart that yet had a smile to comfort the old man whose face she watched so anxiously.

"Yes, dear," she said, "this is Maisie's child. He is like her and like you. His eyes are just like hers, only he was so shy he would not let me look at them. And, do you know, he thought I was Maisie, and came running to me open-

armed, with — oh, such a glad little face! It was no wonder he hated the sight of me when he found I was such a take-in."

Oliver wondered if it were possible in any circumstances to hate the sight of so sweet a face, while the old man bent over the crib with dim, peering eyes, saying below his breath, "Maisie's child! Dear, dear! my little Maisie's child!"

CHAPTER XXV

MAISIE'S LITTLE BOY

'T is but five years since he was born.

Not sunlight scampering over corn

Were merrier thing.

A child? A fragment of the morn,

A piece of spring! — W. WATSON.

OW delightful it must be to wake as children wake, so fresh and bright and happy and expectant, without any dread or foreboding or even much remembrance of the naughtiness or the broken toy that had afflicted them so bitterly the day before. Perhaps we shall all wake like that after the long sleep and be satisfied.

Gay's beaming face met Oliver's view as he woke next morning from an uncomfortable dream in which he was trying, clad simply in his pyjamas, to catch a train. I wonder why dreams are sometimes so niggardly in the clothes they vouchsafe us.

It was quite early morning, one of those misty September mornings that clear into such rare beauty later on in the day. There was a soft chattering of waking birds in the ivy outside, and a wood-pigeon in the fir-tree had just begun rather drowsily to advise, "Take two coos, Taffy."

Across the garden, drenched with dew, cows were grazing in the meadow — perhaps the two that Taffy was invited to make off with; perhaps Sweetlips and Pretty Maid, who had been so often described to the children by Maisie.

Gay had climbed out of his crib, and finding Oliver asleep, had explored the room and taken a survey of the outside world from each of the three windows, till it became quite impossible to contain his excitement at what he could see, and it was absolutely necessary to wake some one and impart his experiences.

In Parley Mansions you might watch and watch for hours and only see dingy sparrows, the same colour as the bricks, or a cat climbing stealthily along a roof. From the upper flats you have to crane over the balcony more than grown-up people always approve to see dogs in the street or parrots in neighbouring flats; but from one of "you and me's" bedroom windows Gay saw a rabbit come out of the shrubbery

and cross the lawn, leaving a trail in the dew behind him, stopping suddenly in its course to sit up and listen, with its nose twinkling and its long ears erect. From the second window Gay saw a gorgeous pheasant strutting along, all burnished gold and bronze, picking up its feet so carefully as if it were afraid of getting them wet, and ultimately flying clumsily up into the fir-tree, with its rough, discordant cry startling Gay perched on a chair inside. From the third window Gay saw a couple of squirrels chasing one another from branch to branch in such lighthearted frolics that he clapped his hands and shouted in sympathy.

After this he was really obliged to wake Oliver, and was strongly of opinion that it was time to get up and go out, and rather unwillingly submitted to Oliver's decision that it was much too early to do anything of the sort.

When at last there were sounds of movement in the house Oliver consented to dress Gay. Being himself dependent on shaving-water, he said he would have to await its arrival, and that if Gay wished to explore beyond the bedroom he must do so alone.

So Gay settled down contentedly to look out

of the window, reporting to Oliver what happened in what appeared to the child something nearly equalling in delights the Zoological Gardens.

Presently Oliver heard an exclamation of delight: "There's Bobs! He's looking for me! I'm sure he's looking for me! He's going rushing round to see where I am. He wants me to throw a ball for him. — Bobs! Bobs! Here I am up here; don't you see? I'm coming directly Chums has got his shaving-water. He's obliged to shave, so I'm waiting for him."

And then suddenly Gay slid off the chair with rather an awe-stricken face.

"There's some one down there," he said -"an old gentleman with gray hair. And he looked up and nodded to me."

"Oh," said Oliver, "that's your grandfather. He came in to look at you when you were asleep last night. I expect he's going to see the ducks and fowls, and I should n't wonder if he looked at the pigs. And perhaps he has a bit of sugar for the pony - Cock Robin its name is."

Gav took a furtive look out of the window at the happy individual who was going to see such interesting things.

"He's still there," he reported; "and he beckoned to me. Do you think the shaving-water will be very, very long before it comes?"

"I'm afraid it may be," Oliver said resignedly, having distinctly heard the sound of cans on the back-stairs. "You go on, and I'll come as soon as I can."

The child hesitated, and Oliver tossed him his Tam-o'-Shanter.

"What shall I say?" he asked.

"Oh, anything. Say you're Maisie's boy. You know the way down, and the front door is open. Make haste or he'll go without you."

So off went Gay, and the next minute Oliver heard the clear, crisp little voice below the window: "Please, I'm Gay. I'm Maisie's own little boy. May I come with you? Is you going to see the pigs?" And the old, slow voice in reply: "God bless Maisie's own little boy!"

Then a boisterous greeting from Bobs, and Oliver, peeping out, saw Gay and Bobs rolling together on the dewy grass, with disastrous effects on a clean sailor-suit, Bobs's bounds and leaps having been too much for Gay's equilibrium.

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Oliver had his hand on the window to lean out and call to Gay not to mind, there were no bones broken, but to come back and be straightened up; but he drew back when he saw the old man had come to the rescue, and had picked Gay up, and was trying to remove traces of the fall with a big bandana handkerchief, and investigating a graze on one knee with much patience and concern, while Bobs sat up watching with a long face of supernatural wisdom, as if he had not been the prime cause of the catastrophe.

And presently Oliver saw the three go off along the path into the kitchen-garden under the apple-tree, Gay and the old man hand in hand, and Bobs circling round them like a beneficent, shaggy fairy with a very long body and short legs.

Oliver had hoped yesterday, when Gay was so naughty and troublesome, that Maisie's sweet peace was not molested by concern at her son's behaviour, but now he would have liked to think that her sad eyes were gladdened by those two figures hand in hand in the old garden that she loved so much.

But, indeed, it is as well that the knowledge of what passes on earth is in higher hands to grant or to withhold to those who have crossed the flood, for even from the first the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil hung on the same fair tree in the midst of the garden, and in this life we cannot separate the two.

Oliver gave a little sigh as those two passed out of sight. It was all quite as it should be, and much to be desired, that Gay and his grandfather should be friends. But, after all, there was something very heart-warming yesterday in the clasp of those naughty, petulant young arms tight round his neck, and the feeling that home and happiness meant to that small, curly-headed rascal just "you and me," with perhaps a slight extension to include Mrs. Sims and Bobs.

He came down to breakfast in rather a formal condition, with a good many urgent reasons for his immediate return to London, but was disarmed by Juliet's unfeigned delight in the friendship that had been established between her father and the child. It was quite a reproach to him for his momentary jealousy at the fickleness of a child whom he had hardly known for three months, while Juliet had been her father's companion and all in all to him for years.

He was also altogether appeased by Gay's

rapturous return to his *premier amour*, and the breathless narrative of all that he had seen and done, all of which must be done over again for Oliver's benefit directly after breakfast.

It was Oliver who suggested that Gay's stool and basin of bread-and-milk should be placed by his grandfather's side, and left to the old man the small attentions that were necessary during the process of breakfast.

Gay had brought in a warm, cream-coloured egg which he had taken himself from a snug nest which a comfortable speckled hen had just left with many loud remarks of self-satisfaction. He had carried it in himself with both hands and many reproofs to Bobs, who could not understand such a slow and cautious progress; and he had personally superintended its boiling in the big kitchen so often described by Maisie, where the servants were already his devoted slaves.

Gay was still a little shy of Juliet. Her likeness to his mother troubled him, and sometimes the sound of her voice startled him—as it did, indeed, Oliver also—with its similarity to a voice that was still.

But with his grandfather the most friendly

of terms had been established, and Oliver was amused to see that Gay had at once taken the lead, and that there was a funny little air of protection and patronage in his treatment of the old man, that yet had something pathetic in it.

So Oliver let himself be persuaded to stay on till the evening train, for there was still much to tell and much to hear, and much also that Juliet was glad to debate with him as to the future; for it fell naturally into these two advising together while the old man and Gay wandered away hand in hand along the pleasant, shady garden-walks and out into the sunny meadow.

"He has been failing very much," Juliet said, with fond eyes following the two, "since Maisie went. It was so sudden, you know. She had been staying away on a visit with some friends of ours, and we were expecting her home. She was quite the life and soul of the place, and father was wrapt up in her; and it always seemed a bit dull and quiet when she was away, and we reckoned the days till she would come back. But the very day she was to return we had a letter saying she was married, but that there were reasons why she could not tell us

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about it at present, but that she was very, very happy - the happiest girl in the world - with the best and dearest husband, and she longed for the time when we could know him. She asked us not to say anything to the Brooks, with whom she had been staying, as they knew nothing about it, and thought when she was leaving that she was returning home. It would not be long, she said, before she came, and there would be no longer any need of concealment, and we should be as happy as she was. And so we waited, every day thinking she would come, or that we should hear. Father used to listen and watch till I could hardly bear it, and he got that patient look in his eyes and the stoop in his shoulders, and lost his interest in things. I don't know when he has been so bright as he is to-day with little Gay. I think it is partly that the waiting and listening are over, and he knows."

"Well?" said Oliver.

"We never heard anything more till yester-day, when Gay ran to meet me, and you brought her letter—five long years without her—Christmases—springs with the flowers coming out"—— Juliet's voice broke at the

remembrance of the miss and the want and the emptiness of those waiting years.

"But why? How was it?" Oliver said; and then quickly added, as a spasm of pain passed over Juliet's gentle face, "No, don't tell me! It is no concern of mine. I don't want to intrude on your trouble."

"I should like to tell you. You were her friend when she was very friendless, and have been so good to Gay. We shall always feel grateful. I remember Captain Shirley. He was staying down in this neighbourhood the summer before this happened, and was here a good deal. I never liked him much, and I didn't fancy Maisie did either; but he admired her, as every one else did, and he was good-looking and pleasant. I fancy his people are very well off, but he had been very extravagant and given them a great deal of trouble; so I suppose he was afraid to tell them that he was going to marry a girl with hardly any money, and he persuaded Maisie to marry him secretly."

"Was he good to her?"

Juliet shook her head sadly. "I don't know. She is very loyal; there is not a word of blame. But after Gay was born he exchanged into a

regiment in India, and went out leaving her to follow later. And then Do was born, and then the news came that he had been killed by an accident when he was playing polo."

"And it broke her heart," Oliver said, thinking of the unutterable sadness of her face.

Again Juliet shook her head. "I don't know—it is only my fancy—but I think the heart-break may have begun before. He died without having told his family anything of his marriage, and there was nothing among his papers to tell of it."

"It was very cruel! Did she communicate with his people?"

"Yes; she wrote to the lawyer, and had an insolent letter treating her as if — Oh, my poor Maisie! My poor, proud little Maisie!"

The colour had rushed up into Juliet's face to the very roots of her hair, and she covered her face with her hands, as if the very sunshine were full of insult and shame; and Oliver felt as if he could set out and travel all the world over to kick that lawyer who had wounded Juliet through her sister.

"She had no one to counsel her, no one to advise, and she was so proud and sensitive, she made up her mind - it was very wrong, of course, and foolish - that she would not be beholden to the family to whom her husband had been ashamed to acknowledge her, and whose lawyer had so insulted her. She had a small income of her own, and she was very musical. There was an old German violinist who was very kind to her and helped her to get engagements, and she got on as well as she could. And she never let us know -- never let us know - though father was watching and listening, and so was I! He would get up half-a-dozen times in the winter evenings and make some excuse for going to the door, and come back with such a disappointed look, but with some remark about the weather or the stars, so as to try and deceive me. And when any wheels stopped at the gate he would jump up with such a look, enough to break any one's heart! If she had only known what that long waiting was to him" — Juliet's voice trembled and broke from its usual gentle calm - the calm of one who sets her own sorrow steadily on one side to cheer and comfort others - and tears dimmed the eyes that had learned by long practice to look brave and hopeful with an aching heart, and she turned to Oliver with almost an apology. "I don't know what it is," she said, "but I feel as if I had known you quite a long time and that you would understand."

"I think I do," said Oliver.

Gay was in full chase across the lawn after a butterfly which fluttered in front of him in that inconsequent, uncertain way butterflies have, which makes all their movements seem accidental; and the old man, whom Gay had tried in vain to incite to join in the pursuit, stood watching him with those dim, kind old eyes; while Bobs made little dashes after Gay, betrayed for a moment into folly, and then returned feeling rather ashamed of such aberrations from the paths of wisdom, which lead only after such game as rabbits or rats.

"They are so happy together," Juliet said, "it seems a pity they should ever be parted."

"Need they be parted?"

"That is what I wanted to talk to you about. If we might keep him and leave the Shirleys alone. I am sure it is what Maisie would have liked best. But would it be right?"

"I don't think the Shirleys need be considered," Oliver said.

Gay was hurrying his grandfather off to see the cows milked, tyrannising over him in the most outrageous way. As they passed out of sight under the apple-tree the old man had Gay's scarlet Tam-o'-Shanter on his gray head, while his grandson was almost eclipsed in a large soft gray felt-hat.

It seemed a pity to have brought the two together if they were to be parted directly, and the child to be pressed upon people who, perhaps, would be unwilling to receive him, and would only do it because they were obliged; and just now, too, when Ralph Shirley's marriage with Doris would in all probability bring other grand-children to inherit the title and estates.

"It is not the Shirleys I was thinking of, but little Gay," Juliet went on. "He ought to bear his father's name and be recognised by his father's people. When he grows to be a man he may not thank us for not claiming his rights. They will take him away from us, and they will have the right to do so. Oh! of course they'll want to have him. He's just a child any one would take to; he's so bonny and healthy and sturdy and bright"—

"And naughty," Oliver suggested. "If he

behaves to the Shirleys as he did to you yester-day I expect they'll be only too glad to hand him over, bag and baggage."

"Oh! but that is only because he thought I was Maisie. He can't quite look at me yet without a pang. He'll love me all the better by-and-by—that is, if the Shirleys will let us have a by-and-by."

The by-and-by seemed to have come before Oliver left that evening, for when he drove away to the station, Gay, who had promised to be a man as Chums was coming back very soon, hid a very quivering manly face in Juliet's skirts; and the last glimpse that Oliver had as he turned the corner under the lime-trees was of Juliet kneeling by his side holding a very shaking little figure in her arms, while Bobs, with a face of grave concern, reared up a long and shaggy body to put two large forefeet on the child's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXVI

SHIRLEY COURT

And saw
The boy set up betwixt his grandsire's knees
Who thrust him in the hollows of his arm,
And clapt him on the hands and on the cheeks,
Like one that loved him. — TENNYSON.

SIR JOHN SHIRLEY was laid up with a touch of gout. It is one of the peculiarities of gout that it always makes itself felt at the most inconvenient times, and just now the worthy baronet was especially anxious to be sound in wind and limb, for his eldest and only surviving son was about to take to himself a wife, and he by no means wished his future daughter-in-law to consider him a decrepit old person with one foot in the grave, though when an extra severe twinge came in his toe he almost wished that he had, if he might be allowed to choose which foot should be so interred.

This engagement of Ralph's was, on the whole, satisfactory. It was just what the old man had

been agitating himself about for some time past, more especially since his other son, Frampton, had been killed by an accident in India.

But, as often happens when people get what they want, and especially gouty people, it was not quite as gratifying as it ought to have been. Frampton had always been his favourite son, as is usually the case with the one who gives the most trouble. Ralph had had bad health as a boy, and had been cockered up by his mother, and had in consequence a good many of what Sir John called "finicky" ways; and now that death had dropped its kindly veil over his second son's debts and dissipations, Sir John went back in fond memory to the bright-faced youngster who rode so pluckily to hounds, and was as keen over yachting as his father, while Ralph was always sea-sick if there were a ripple on the water, and pottered along the high-road miles behind the field; and, even so, was more than once pitched off and nearly broke his neck or, worse still, his horse's knees.

In those days Sir John had taken for granted that Ralph would never marry, but that some day when Frampton had sowed his wild oats, of which there seemed likely to be a plentiful crop, he would settle down and bring home to the Court some nice, good sort of girl from one of the houses included in their hunt, with perhaps a little money of her own, and a good seat on horseback, and no nonsense about her, who would keep up the old traditions of Shirley Court, and make his old age comfortable and not too dull.

He felt now and then that Frampton was going the pace a little too recklessly, and more than once father and son had a stormy scene, generally ending in the old man drawing a cheque which he solemnly asseverated should be the very last.

It was after one of these scenes that Frampton exchanged into an Indian regiment, much to his father's vexation, declaring that it was the only way to economise and pull up. Then came the news of his death, and Sir John was called upon to settle up a good many debts, some of which were not of a very creditable description; but he left as much of the dirty work as possible to his solicitor. And now time had taken off some of the vividness of his disgust and disappointment, and Frampton was once more before his mind's eye the light-hearted, easy-going young

fellow who was such good company and rode so straight.

"Ralph looks like a counter-jumper on horse-back," the old man told himself. "He's all very well in a London drawing-room, but he's not a bit of a Shirley, and I don't know where he got his finicky ways from."

But now that Frampton was gone it was absolutely necessary for Ralph to marry, as the Shirley estates had gone down from father to son for many generations, and the old man brought various suitable matches to his son's notice, with, as he thought, much delicacy and artful manœuvring, but with so many imperfections in the velvet glove that the clumsy old hand of steel was painfully apparent to Ralph's eyes, who, finicky and counter-jumperish as he might be in his father's sight, had no idea of being married off to any of those weather-beaten, horsy young women, though they might be of good county families and ride over hedges and ditches like cowboys.

He fully intended, if he married at all, to please himself, and accordingly one day brought the announcement of his engagement to Doris Mostyn; and about the same time as Oliver took little Gay to the Grange, Doris was coming on a visit to Shirley Court, to be introduced to her prospective father-in-law and her future home.

Now, it may have been that the attack of gout coming on made Sir John more irritable than usual — for we know, and some of us by experience, in ourselves or others, that the irritability preceding an attack of gout is well-nigh maddening — but certainly the introduction to Doris had not been successful, and Ralph was keenly aware of it, not being so much in love with her as to be blind to her defects or oblivious of their effect on other people.

Doris, as we have seen in her dealings with Oliver, was a little deficient in tact, a want that is best supplied by a simple sincerity, which perhaps is almost better, but which Doris also lacked; and Sir John, being a straightforward nature, uncomplicated by many dealings with society, could not appreciate the elegant—I have hesitated so long for a word that I am fain to use Sir John's rather unvarnished description of Doris's manner—humbug which pervaded her behaviour.

Ralph himself felt a little annoyed at her per-

sistent treatment of his father as a very old man, running to fetch his hat for him, and picking up his eyeglasses, and deprecating his usual courteous, old-world politeness of opening doors for her and handing her to her place, as if it were unbecoming to accept such amenities from one so aged and infirm.

And then, just as he wanted to show this young London madam — and not so young either, his own wife having been only eighteen when they married — that he was not quite laid on the shelf yet, and had plenty of life left in him, came this gout which really made a hobbling old man of him, and he was obliged grudgingly to accept some of her kind offices of fetching and carrying, which he would much rather have done for himself, even at the cost of great pain and much bad language.

So he withdrew himself into his own sanctum, and stoutly declined Doris's proposal to enact the part of ministering angel, preferring the ministrations of his man, who was used to outbursts of unparliamentary language and took them for what they were worth — which was not a little, for while Sir John was vituperating Forbes with all the names he could lay his tongue to, he

would have his finger in his pocket for a coin to put into the man's hand when the paroxysm was over, a solatium received with a deprecating "Lor', Sir John! I didn't think nothing of it."

As he could hardly adopt the same line with Doris, he thought it would be safer to keep out of her way, and telegraphed to his sister, Lady Marsland, to come and chaperon the young people.

It was that very day that Juliet's letter arrived, containing copies of the marriage certificate and that of Gay's birth, and a very simple account of the secret marriage.

"We are very anxious," she wrote, "to keep the boy with us, as that was my sister's wish, but we thought it was right that you should know all the facts, and that Gay should be recognised as your grandson."

There was something about the letter that took the old man's fancy, and brought back to him a warm memory of that black sheep of his who, as is generally the case, is nearer the shepherd's heart than all the other immaculate white ones who give no trouble. It also explained one or two allusions in his son's letters which he had passed over at the time as meaningless, but which now recurred to his memory.

Of course, there might be a screw loose in the story — most likely there was. Also, of course, though the writer disowned all wish to foist the child on him, or extort money on his behalf, it might be only her artfulness, and when once she had got her hold she would begin turning the screw.

He had half a mind to hand the matter over to Baines to sift out the truth. He had managed several unpleasant little jobs with much discretion before, and had stopped off people who had bid fair to be troublesome and annoying.

Sir John had even taken his pen in hand to scrawl a line to the lawyer, when something (I think it was the sound of Doris's laugh on the terrace below his window—she had a pretty, silvery laugh, but when you are gouty even a pretty, silvery laugh will get on your nerves) made him alter his mind, and instead he directed his scrawl to Miss Ross, saying that he was laid up with gout, but if she could, without inconvenience, bring the little boy to Shirley Court, he should be glad to see the child before instructing his solicitor to make the necessary inquiries.

"No doubt," he said to himself as he despatched the letter, "he will be a little, dressed-up doll, a pasty-faced, cockered-up darling, who will put his finger in his mouth and snivel when I speak to him. Bah! I'm an old fool to bother myself about him. I'd better have left it to Baines. What a jolly little chap that was at Blessington! I only wish I could imagine Madam Doris the mother of such a youngster as that!"

He repented himself still more when a letter came saying that Miss Ross would bring the child, as requested, on the following day, and again he hesitated whether he would not telegraph to stop her, and turn the whole matter over to Baines; but he let the day slip away without doing so, and again some trifling irritation with Doris made him resolve to see the matter through himself.

"Anyhow, it won't do Ralph any harm," he said to himself, "even if this child should turn out to be Frampton's all right and above-board. Ralph and his heirs come first anyhow."

He was better the next day, and able to get down to his library—the fine old oak-panelled room that led out on the terrace—though his foot and hand were still swathed up in cottonwool and oil-silk to a gigantic size, and his progress downstairs was such that Ralph hastily invited Doris to take a turn in the garden.

It was this that led to Doris and Ralph being present when Juliet and Gay were ushered into the library, for when the old man was comfortably settled in his arm-chair, and his foot lifted to the desired level, and his temper was a little less irascible, Ralph brought his fiancée to the window to congratulate him on being downstairs again, and they were there when the carriage that had been sent to meet Juliet and Gay at the station returned and they were shown into the library.

If Sir John had felt nervous at the prospect of this interview, poor Juliet had felt a hundred times more so, and her knees literally shook under her as she got out of the carriage at the portico of Shirley Court. It was only a few days, to be sure, that she and Gay had been together, but Gay was part of the happy old days when she and Maisie had been all in all to one another, and to lose him would be like another separation from her sister. Neither was it her own parting with Gay, which seemed so

imminent, that she felt alone; others always came first with Juliet. There was her father, who seemed to have revived and brightened into fresh interest and life since the child came, to be twenty years younger, and who watched him go that morning with the wistful eyes of age which have seen so many travellers set forth and so few return and have lost the unquenchable hope of young hearts.

As they went Juliet felt almost angry at the radiant health of the child, at his bright eyes and rosy cheeks, the upright, alert little figure and the happy, brisk young voice. She drew him away quite churlishly when one of their fellow-passengers noticed him, and pushed back the curls from his forehead almost roughly, with a wish to make him look less jolly and winsome.

It made the expected parting all the harder since the by-and-by when she would win Gay's love, which had seemed when she spoke of it to be far away in the dim future, was richly hers already, and the curly head rubbed fondly against her arm, and the young arms clung round her, and the bright little face looked up into hers with entire confidence in Judy, into

whom the alarming Aunt Juliet had satisfactorily melted.

If only he would have been naughty and tiresome and fractious it would not have been so hard
to part with him, even if the Shirleys had cared
to lay claim to such a child; but Gay was in,
even for him, an unusually beaming condition,
and greatly excited and pleased at the large
carriage that was in waiting at the station, and
the dignified flunkey with a cockade in his hat
who received them on the platform, and at the
lodge at the gate through which the carriage
swept, and at the old woman who came and
opened it and bobbed a curtsy to the smiling
little face at the carriage window.

There were deer to be seen under the big trees across the park, which led Gay to expect that there might be lions and tigers farther on, or even, by happy chance, a monkey-house.

He was a little bit awed at the big entrance, and the stately reception by the two footmen and pompous butler, and he clung a trifle nervously to Juliet's hand, not knowing what a broken reed he was leaning on, as she was frightened to death herself, and was trying to collect her senses, and steady her shaking knees, and drill

her dry tongue into a dignified and suitable form of address.

"Miss Ross," announced the butler, and she was indistinctly aware of a large, rather dark room with bookcases all round, and of an old man in a big chair near the window, at which stood other people, and then —

"Hullo!" said a gruff voice, in pleased recognition, from the arm-chair.

And "Hullo!" responded Gay, who at once withdrew the hand that had been holding Juliet's in a very firm grasp, and, crossing the room, laid it in the unswaddled left hand stretched out to greet him; for these two were old friends, having met on the *Nora Creina*.

"How very much taken Sir John seemed with that child!" Doris Mostyn said a couple of hours later, when Ralph joined her in the drawing-room after seeing Juliet and Gay into the carriage that was to take them back to the station. "For my part, I thought he was rather a rude, forward little fellow, asking all sorts of questions, and interrupting when other people were talking. I suppose the whole thing is what they call—a plant, is n't it?"

"Well," Ralph answered, "hardly that, I think.

Of course, it will all have to be inquired into; but as far as the Rosses are concerned, they only seem desperately anxious to keep the child. And no wonder; he's a fine little fellow."

Doris made no reply, and Ralph went on, with a laugh: "He was immensely interested in the pater's gout, and wanted his own hand done up in cotton-wool and oil-silk, and the pater promised him that he had a good chance of having personal experience of it some day, as gout generally skips a generation, and neither his father nor I were troubled with it. He got hold of the word 'skipping.' He had seen girls doing it in the park, but he could n't think how any one could do it with one foot done up to such a tremendous size. He was asking his aunt about it as he went out. I must tell the governor; he'll be immensely tickled."

"Is he really your brother's son?"

"No mistake about that. He's the very image of Frampton. Why, the likeness struck my father when he saw him at some seaside place when he was yachting a few weeks ago, without having the least notion who he was. But I say, Doris, didn't you know this Oliver Bruce that Miss Ross was talking about?

Was n't he the fellow you introduced me to at Lady Ventnor's? I could n't think where I knew the name. He seems to be a thorough good sort—'The best and kindest man in the world,' Miss Ross said; and the boy looked up and said, 'That's Chums.'"

Doris languidly signified that she had known Oliver Bruce in former days.

"I think," Ralph went on, with a laugh, "that it's an uncommonly good thing for you and me, Doris, that this paladin friend of yours had first innings with Miss Juliet, for the governor is pretty nearly as much taken with her as with the boy, and I think if he had not been forestalled we might have had a pretty young stepmother."

There was a slightly acid look in Doris's face as she answered, "Well, there's no accounting for tastes."

And Ralph discreetly made no reply, as such matters admit of no argument, but he thought that in this case the taste was not so unaccountable.

CHAPTER XXVII

OUT OF THE FOG

Tired of the sense of a fight to be won, Of days to live through, and of work to be done; Tired of ourselves and of being alone. — MILLER.

SEPTEMBER may be a very beautiful month and it may be very much the reverse, and towards the end of September in that year the weather seemed inclined to show its very worst side.

Oliver Bruce, as he sat at his writing-table one afternoon, was inclined to look rather gloomily on his prospects both within and without.

Outwardly there was a fog, nearly obscuring the houses opposite, and hanging in great dirty drops on the window-frames and balcony railings, and on some dead plants that had been planted by Gay and copiously watered for a few days, to the indignation of the people in the flat below. He could just see the plane-tree that had given him some consolation in the early spring, but which now loomed gaunt and nearly bare

through the fog, with only a few dun-coloured, ragged leaves and some prickly, forlorn-looking fruit.

The outward prospect was certainly depressing, and inside the flat there was not much to exhilarate, as the chimney smoked persistently and Mrs. Sims had the toothache.

Inwardly the prospect should have been brighter, for on the table before him lay two letters, one of which was edged with silver and contained an invitation from Colonel Mostyn to the marriage of his daughter Doris to Ralph, son of Sir John Shirley, of Shirley Court, Midlanshire, on 9th October, at Christ Church, Lancaster Place; and the other was from a lawyer informing him of a legacy that had fallen to him by the death of a distant relation, which would make a very considerable improvement in Oliver's income.

Certainly the latter was a communication that might have been expected to bring a little sunshine into a foggy day, and the former had nothing in it to produce the opposite effect, seeing that there was not the faintest lingering feeling about Doris, who might have married the man in the moon for all Oliver cared.

But still Oliver sat with his elbows on the table, and his head in his hands, in a regular fit of the blues. Perhaps other people's weddingbells are not the most exhilarating sounds, though there was a time when the prospect of hearing his own made him shudder; and he wished that old cousin of his had left his money to charities, as his own small means were enough to rub along with in a flat with Mrs. Sims, and a larger income would only mean larger responsibilities.

It was a fortnight since he took Gay to the Grange — only a fortnight, though it seemed at least six months — and he had heard nothing of him. Why should he? That queer little episode was over; he had restored the child to his own people, and had received more thanks than was at all necessary for his small share in the transaction. He could not complain of any ingratitude on their part; he must be associated in their minds with a very sad and painful story, and no doubt they would be glad to forget all about it as soon as possible — and quite rightly so.

But when people say they do not complain, it generally means that they feel they have a cause

to do so; and when they say a thing is only what they expected, it means that they are bitterly disappointed. So I fancy the fog that prevailed in Oliver's mind that afternoon was mainly due to disappointment, as no letter from Byford appeared on his breakfast-table, with perhaps a scribbled enclosure ending with many little crosses, like the one Mrs. Sims treasured yet as it was "a letter for 'oo."

He had heard nothing about what was to be done with the opposite flat, though he concluded that at Michaelmas it would be given up, and Michaelmas was drawing near.

Before Gay went Oliver used often to go in there and look round the dusty rooms, and he and Gay used to stand hand in hand before the picture of Do's garden and talk of all its beauties; and Juliet's sweet face would smile down on them as if she were sympathising with what they said.

Now Oliver felt as if it would be an impertinent intrusion to go there, though he was longing to look again at both pictures, now that he had seen the originals; and on some of these dull, dark days it would have been quite a refreshment to see that sunny lawn and the living

green of the trees, but I think he thought more of the other picture.

This afternoon he was certainly thinking of that, though when he roused himself from his dejected attitude, it was to take Doris's photograph and study it closely. Any superficial observer might have drawn conclusions from his gloomy face, and the silver-edged invitation-card which had fluttered from the table to the floor, and the prolonged scrutiny of the photograph, and would have maintained that the reason of his depression was very evident.

He had not any intention of going to that wedding, but if he went he wondered if he might see Gay there; for if he were recognised, as he surely would be, as Sir John Shirley's grandson, it was not unlikely that he might be at his uncle's wedding. What had passed about that recognition? He knew that a letter was to be written to Sir John; and really, he thought, some intimation might have been sent to him as to what the answer had been, though of course he had no right to expect to be in the family confidence.

It is curious when any one's thoughts are circling round one particular person how strictly

impersonal all the reflections are. He never admitted even to himself that he had expected Juliet to write; if he used any pronoun in his thoughts, it was always that convenient "they" and "them," though he could hardly have included Gay or his grandfather in his undefined charge of neglect.

A very prolonged ring at the bell roused him for a minute from his broodings, but it was not the time for any postal delivery, and the few people he knew in London were mostly out of town, so he relapsed once more into his former depression, with his chin sunk on his chest and his hands hanging limply down, and he did not even turn his head when the door behind him opened. Mrs. Sims had been very surly at lunch, and he had made up his mind to leave her alone till temper and toothache were better.

But it was certainly not Mrs. Sims who came pattering across the room and pushed a large, damp nose into one of those limp, listless hands of his, and planted two hairy fore-paws, not devoid of mud, on Oliver's knees. Nor was it she — propriety forbid! — who followed with a rush and a jump on to Oliver's knees, as to a well-known resting-place, and an arm round Oliver's

neck, and an apple cheek rubbing against his.

"Chums," said Gay, "Judy and me and Bobs has come to fetch you home; and grandfather says you is to come, and Mrs. Sims too. And Bobs would come in first to tell you himself."

Oliver gave a quick look round, but no one was apparent but Mrs. Sims, with temper and toothache alike banished from a very beaming face, almost tearful with delight.

"Oh, Judy?" answering the unspoken inquiry. "She've gone into our flat, and she'll want me directly to show her where everything is and tell her about everything; and she'll want you too. But I thought I'd better come and see you and tell you we was coming to tea, and to say that you and Mrs. Sims is to pack up and come home with us, for grandfather says so. Oh yes! you are. Me and Judy has been getting Mrs. Sims's room ready, and you and me's to have the robin bedroom, the one we slept in that first night. And you're to stop ever so long; grandfather says so, and Judy too."

Oliver looked doubtfully at Mrs. Sims, who was not generally inclined to do things, as she expressed it, "all of a hop," expecting to see

difficulties and impossibilities depicted on her expressive countenance; but she was wiping a surreptitious tear out of the corner of her eye with her apron, and only muttered something about "seeing about a cake for tea and them shirts of Mr. Oliver's from the laundry."

Oliver began some feeble protest about coming another day, which Gay laughed to scorn, and Mrs. Sims flung back an indignant remark over her shoulder to the effect that she "did n't know what these 'orrid flats was good for if you could n't just shut 'em up when you'd a mind to;" and a minute after Oliver heard her getting down his portmanteau from the shelf in the bathroom, and felt that it was useless to contend against the combined will of Mrs. Sims and Gay, with grandfather in the background, and — Juliet.

"Come and help Judy," Gay said. "She's going to turn out all the things, and I'm going to take my wagon home with me, and grandfather's going to paint the wheels scarlet and put fresh spots on the horse. He knows all about horses, he does, and just where the spots ought to go."

"I don't expect your aunt wants me there if

she's busy," Oliver said. "You go and say if I can be of any use I shall be pleased to come."

"She does want you," Gay said. "She wants you very much. She said"——

And then Oliver went.

She was standing in the little sitting-room, looking round at the shabby furniture and the dusty ornaments and books, all lying just as they had been left by the vanished hand, with that pathetic everyday look that makes tears rise in the heart and gather in the eyes sooner than greater or more important things. There was a piece of work with the needle still in it lying on an untidy work-basket; one of Do's dolls was sitting on the closed keyboard of the piano simpering and staring with round eyes across the lonely room; a small glove was on the floor by the window; some music lay open on the sofa, while on the wall was the picture of Do's garden, sunny and spring-like in the autumn fog, and Juliet's own portrait smiling down to meet the eyes of its original dim with tears.

"Judy," called Gay's fresh little voice, so young and full of life and hope, calling her back from the dark valley where she was stretching to catch a last look or parting word from one who had passed through it — "Judy, here's Chums. And I want to find my wagon and show Bobs the kitchen."

So Oliver went in alone, and Juliet held out her hand to him, still with the tears shining in her eyes, but with a smile that seemed to lift away the fog for good and all and fill the room with the sunshine that always prevails in Do's garden.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said, "but I should like to do it here."

Gay was very busy getting out his wagon, which he found much smaller than he had led his grandfather to expect, so greatly does distance lend enchantment to objects, and he had to take it over to consult Mrs. Sims as to what should be done about one of the wheels; and then he stopped to superintend the baking of the cake, so Juliet had time to express her gratitude to Oliver as far as he would allow her to express what he maintained was so utterly uncalled for, and he to tell her all he could remember of Maisie and little Do.

"I was wondering," Juliet said, "if there was anything you would care to have in memory of Maisie — a book or one of the pictures.

We should be so glad if you would choose something."

She looked at the picture of Do's garden, but it was to the other picture that his eyes turned—the sweet, smiling face that had brightened so many dark days.

"Would you really care to have that?" she said, answering his unspoken wish.

"I should care very much to have it," Oliver said; "but there is something else I would rather have, though I hardly dare to ask you to give it me."

"Judy! Chums!" shouted Gay, running in, followed by Bobs in intense excitement. "Tea is ready, and Mrs. Sims says the cake is done to a turn."

So Oliver dropped a little hand that he had taken in his, but I think, all the same, she gave him what he hardly dared to ask; indeed, I think she had given it to him already, perhaps over Gay's prostrate body as he lay kicking and roaring on the grass in Do's garden.



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